

Author's Notes: This is an Alternate Universe story in which Merope Gaunt Riddle survives to raise her son, Tom. The premise is that as Merope is dying in the ward of the orphanage, she sees something in the window, a vision of what is to come for Tom's life... and horrified by what sees, she musters enough strength to save her own life through magic.

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## Chapter One

When the doorbell rang on a cold, windy New Year's Eve, it sounded like a death knell to Mrs. Lucy Cole. Ringing at such an hour, on such a night, the bell could not mean good news. She was right.

'Get that, would you, Mary?' Mrs. Cole called to the Irish scullery maid. The Stockwell Orphanage was too short on funds to keep a permanent maid to answer the door, so the kitchen girls and cleaners took turns with the welcoming duties. The girl, Mary, scurried over to the door and pulled the latch.

Standing hunched-over on the stoop was the outline of a very pregnant young woman. She was soaked to the skin from melted snow; behind her, sharp crystals of ice swirled into unfriendly drifts. A great chill gust swept into the front hall of the building. Mary squeaked in surprise.

'Oh, good Lord,' said Mrs. Cole. 'Right. Get her into a bed, then.' She stepped forward and took the woman's arm; it was scrawny and weak. There was snow dusted on her shoulders and hair, white flakes that were now melting into pneumonic cold water. This was trouble, oh, plain as the floorboards, yes. Mrs. Cole noticed that the woman's feet barely made a sound as she walked; despite her advanced pregnancy she could not have weighed more than eight stone. Too thin, far too thin.

'Here, missus,' said Mary, helping Mrs. Cole and the mystery woman into the tiny ward for unwed mothers. Mary carried an old-fashioned gas lantern that threw dancing shadows behind them. A bed was

turned down and ready. A table next to it held scissors, a basin of hot water, and a pile of clean cloths.

'Onto the bed, miss, here we are. My name is Mrs. Lucy Cole, I help with the orphanage. Here,' Mrs. Cole helped the woman up onto the bed. It seemed to sap all of the pregnant woman's strength and her face grew so pale that it looked bloodless. Gritting her teeth, Mrs. Cole spread the woman's legs and lifted her ragged dress, gesturing for Mary to bring the lantern for a proper look. 'No time for the doctor,' she muttered to herself. The baby was coming, and soon; the woman was well into the labor process.

'Mary, get some hot water, start the fire, and we'll need scissors, some clean rags, and... the fire, girl! She's freezing. For that matter, so am I.'

Mary ran off at Mrs. Cole's bidding.

The pregnant woman would not give her name and did nothing but murmur incoherently. Mrs. Cole wondered if there was an infection or a fever. Tears streamed down the woman's cheeks to mingle with the snowflakes already hovering there; her hair was ragged and stringy. She was not a pretty creature. A dark, mean part of Mrs. Cole wondered what man would bother to take advantage of someone so ugly. Newly married herself, she was no stranger to the appetites of men, but it was generally acknowledged that only loose, attractive, undisciplined young things got themselves into this kind of trouble. At least, that was the common case in the orphanage's unwed mother's ward. This newcomer did not fit the description.

A cry, the strongest yet from the soon-to-be mother, and Mary clapped her hands over her mouth. Somewhere outside, thunder sounded. The snow continued in furious eddies outside the windowpanes and all Mrs. Cole could think was that it was so wet. Wet cheeks, wet clothes, dark red wet on the sheets as the birthing process began. The rest of the ward was empty and so both Mrs. Cole and Mary could focus all their attention on the poor vagrant woman.

Was she a prostitute, Mrs. Cole wondered? A destitute woman who had resorted to selling herself? Had she been forced? There were

many questions to be answered but no time to ask them. The baby was almost in the world.

The woman screamed loudly, one last time, and fell into incoherent gasps of pain.

'Push!' said Mrs. Cole. 'For the love of God, woman, push!'

She did. There was a final spasm of pain on her face and then her head fell slack to the side. She was breathing heavily. Mary, on the other end, caught the newborn child.

'W-what do I do, ma'am?' Mary stuttered.

'Here,' said Mrs. Cole. She snatched up the scissors and cut the already-shriveling umbilical cord. It was a neat snip; the baby would have a normal belly-button. She allowed a moment of self-congratulation as the baby (a look between its legs revealed it as a boy) opened his little mouth and issued a great squalling, healthy cry. Mrs. Cole washed the boy off with warm water and quickly wrapped him up against the cold night.

His mother did not look good. She was paler than she had been before; the sheets beneath her were soaked with blood. Mrs. Cole had seen many a childbirth since she started working in the orphanage; it was known as a place where young mothers could come and leave their children up for adoption. It was the largest institution in South London. Mrs. Cole had gotten her job when she was nineteen years old, five years ago, and it looked like she would take over as headmistress of the orphanage soon. It suited her well, for she was organized, no-nonsense, and a good Christian.

Tonight, however, her good Christianity deserted her for a moment as she gazed down on the bleeding woman. Mrs. Cole wished for the problem to be gone. The baby boy had stopped crying after his brief, loud protest at being flung into the world, and now he was preternaturally silent and staring with eyes that were too focused for a newborn. In the gaslight it was impossible to tell what color his eyes were, but they were dark.

Suddenly wanting to be rid of the burden, Mrs. Cole handed the child over to his weak mother. 'See,' Mrs. Cole said, 'your son. Give him a name.'

The woman's cracked lips moved but no sound came out. She tried again. 'T-Tom, for his father,' she whispered. 'A-and Marvolo for his grandfather. Tom Marvolo Riddle.'

'Hmmph,' said Mrs. Cole. An odd name. She disapproved of oddity. 'Wait here,' she said unnecessarily, for the woman hardly could have moved.

'I-I...' the woman said. She gulped in some air as though it were the last thing she could do, and indeed the situation looked dire: her nose was pinched and her face sallow in the way that suggested death was close behind. She had lost a terrible amount of blood. 'I hope he looks like his father,' she managed to say.

'Hmmph,' said Mrs. Cole again. She hoped so too, for the boy's sake; his mother's features were most unattractive. 'I'll be back. Mary, come with me.'

Mrs. Cole left the mystery woman with her baby and walked down the hall to her office to retrieve the birth certificate form. Her hand hovered over another file of papers; deciding, she retrieved a death certificate, too. For the mother.

All the world was fuzzy. Limbs were unfelt, surroundings were unseen. Merope Gaunt's eyes fluttered open to a dark room. To her left something bright and yellow burned; she turned her head just enough to focus on a gas lamp. A Muggle gas lamp. Where was she?

Something moved in her arms. She glanced down and saw that her baby, her son, was born and blinking up at her with dark blue eyes. Merope knew that she herself was dying. The life was draining out of her onto dark red (once white) sheets. Her life was forfeit so that this little marvel of a being could survive. Her last tears gathered in her eyes.

A great upwelling of love filled her heart as she gazed down at little Tom. He would look like his father, she could tell already, and thanked Merlin for it. Her maternal love overtook her, a great pink cloud of well-being, a yearning to do nothing but hold her son forever and ever. To nurture him and help him and give him a world she'd never known... there was nothing else Merope could have

asked for. She loved Tom Marvolo Riddle a million times more than she had even loved his father, a feat she would have thought impossible.

'Tom,' she whispered. 'Tom. I love you.'

He made a little baby noise and waved his hands in the air. The tiny cry meant that he was hungry, Merope knew, but she had not the strength to push her nightgown aside for him. She could do nothing but hold him.

The pain of childbirth was gone now. Every part of her was numb. It was fading, fading, and she noted dimly that the matron of the orphanage had re-entered the ward and was saying something to her. Holding a piece of paper. It did not matter. Merope gazed past the Muggle woman's head and towards the heavy glass window that protected them from the elements. The night beyond the glass was sodden velvet.

As she watched the window, something strange happened. A swirling of the snowflakes beyond; they looked like a tunnel, or a whirlpool, defying gravity. The formless assumed form, but for Merope's eyes only.

A face in the glass. Tom, her baby. He was older, perhaps ten or eleven, with hollowed face darkened by something beyond. Then he was a handsome man, glaring at her, seeming to hate her. 'Why?' he mouthed. Merope gasped. As she watched, that beautiful face morphed into something serpentine. Something horrible. His eyes flashed red and he wielded a wand. 'Why?' he mouthed again, except that out of his mouth came a forked tongue. Merope squawked a cry of despair.

'No,' she whispered. 'No.'

'It's all right,' said Mrs. Cole. 'We'll take care of the child, put him up for adoption. You can rest now.'

Merope understood. She was given permission to die. But – the vision haunted her. How could it be? Something pierced her numbness, an awareness as though she'd forgotten something vital. She could not leave just yet. And so, with death hovering close above her head, Merope made a final effort. She held her son tight

against her breast and turned her head to Mrs. Cole. 'Leave us for a moment,' she gasped out.

Mrs. Cole looked about to protest, but then nodded curtly and left the ward.

Alone again, Merope's hand crawled beneath the bedcovers and pulled from her nightgown's pocket a thin piece of wood. Her wand, hawthorne, ten inches. Her father had laughed at her using it, for it had belonged to Merope's maternal grandmother, and old Marvolo thought it too long and powerful for a near-Squib like Merope to use. She would show him otherwise.

'Sano Penitus,' she murmured, pointing her wand at her abdomen. A small dark green light flared, but then sputtered out. The spell was weak. Merope sighed. She did not have much time or much strength left... if she could not do this, then her eleventh-hour plan would die with her. 'Sano Penitus,' she commanded again with the last power in her voice.

The healing spell took this time. A stronger green light glowed out of the tip of her wand and surrounded her lower abdomen, hovering there in a cloud that grazed her thighs. Within the green cloud, small tendrils of pure white light whipped around, as though threads directed by an unseen needle, stitching her back together. Merope felt a strange flipping sensation in her womb. Her hand dropped back to her side, clutching the wand, all her reserves used up.

Through it all, baby Tom did not make a sound. He just stared up at his mother.

Merope only just managed to conceal her wand beneath the bedcovers before Mrs. Cole came back in, trailed by the other Muggle girl. They spoke in whispers. The world was heading towards black again. Merope made a feeble noise of protest when they took Tom away from her, but she was too weak. Something deeper than sleep descended upon her.

When Merope opened her eyes again, everything was bright white. Pure. Clean. Was she dead? Had she passed to the other side? Her eyes focused on the leaded panes of a window opposite her... then, her gaze trailed down to land on her own body, prone and covered with a threadbare woolen blanket. Not the sort of the thing that she'd imagined for the afterlife.

'She's awake,' said a voice to her right.

Merope turned her head to see a girl she did not know, half outside a door, speaking to someone. A look at the unlit Muggle lantern on the nightstand brought it all back. She was in an orphanage, in the ward, in London. Her baby was born, a boy. His name was Tom.

'Tom,' Merope said. Her lips were cracked. 'Tom!'

'Calm down, miss, your babe's fine,' said the girl in the door, staring unabashedly.

So he was. Mrs. Cole bustled into the room, carrying a swaddled bundle in her skinny, businesslike arms. 'You made it through, then,' she said to Merope, minor astonishment on her sharp features. She was not an unkind-looking woman, just frazzled. 'Here, he'll be wanting milk, if you can manage. We've had him with Celeste, one of the kitchen girls who's weaning her own child, but...' Mrs. Cole trailed off, holding out the baby.

Merope's hands reached out for him. She was surprised that she was alive still. The healing spell must have worked. She had just enough energy to take little Tom, kiss his forehead. He gurgled at her. She smiled back.

Then Merope pushed down the neckline of her nightgown; it was so torn up that the fabric gave way without much force. The rest came naturally. A wave of great contentment washed over her. Who could have guessed that motherhood would be so wonderful? If she had known, she would never have even considered dying and missing out on it. Last night she had been in the depths of despair, seeing nothing but darkness and misery ahead of her. But this morning, she had a son. Someone to love.

'The baby's birth certificate is in my office,' said Mrs. Cole. 'You can take it with you or leave it here, it's up to you.'

'Take it with me?' Merope asked, looking up.

'Yes, when you leave. You can't live here, child.' There was nothing soft in Mrs. Cole's voice. For her, it was business as usual.

'Oh,' echoed Merope. All of a sudden the world seemed not so rosy. It was something she had not considered. Where to go next was simply finding a place to have her child and then die. But now, as her body gained in strength, having been pulled back from the brink, Merope had to consider what to do next. A lump formed in her throat. It was too much to handle, she had nothing, no-one, no home...

At her breast, the baby pulled away, evidently full. Distracted, Merope pulled her gown back into place.

'Where will I go?' she asked Mrs. Cole.

'Haven't you any family?' the matron asked.

Merope shook her head.

'Who is the father of the child, if I may ask? If—if you know?'

With a sigh, Merope shook her head again. Was this woman stupid? Muggles. 'The father—my husband—abandoned us. He's gone. I can't go back.'

'Your husband?' Mrs. Cole asked. A small gleam appeared in her eyes as though she was interested in the story, or surprised by it.

'My husband.' And Merope closed her mouth, unwilling to relive the pain of it, the memories of how Tom Riddle had reacted when she told him what she was.

'If I were you,' said Mrs. Cole, pausing by the door without the gratification of Merope's life story, 'I would go back to my own people. You have to try, girl. London is no place for a sprite of a thing like you and a brand-new baby. The streets are hard and cold. But, as I said, you can leave the child with us for now. You can get on your feet, come back for him later. If you like.'

Merope clutched Tom closer to her chest. Give him up? She couldn't. Tom made a small noise and she loosed her hold for fear of squeezing him too tight. 'I'm not giving you my baby!' she blurted.

Mrs. Cole sighed. Then she left the ward.

Left alone with her thoughts, Merope held Tom close to her and, because it was easier that way, she spoke aloud to him.

'What's to become of us, little Tom? Where will we go? What'll we do?'

Tom blinked at her. In the morning light coming through the snow-banked windows, Merope saw that his eyes were a startling dark shade of blue, almost purple, as though a hint of red lurked inside them. Merope stared, entranced for a moment, then blinked back at him. She wondered how his eyes had come about; a logical combination of her dull blue eyes and her husband Tom's lovely brown eyes, no doubt. In any case, it was quite fetching.

'I have nothing left,' she whispered to baby Tom. 'I've sold it all... my locket, everything. I have only my wand left. But I can't go home, you see! Papa's in prison, and Morfin...' she shuddered. Her brother would kill the infant. Her brother was a monster.

Tom gurgled again. His eyes dropped shut, first the left one, then the right. Peace settled across his flawless infant face. Gazing down at him, Merope wished that she could feel the same.

Yet, something Mrs. Cole had said resonated with her... go back to your own people, she'd said. That, to Merope's ears, meant the wizarding world. She had lived as a Muggle for nearly six months with her husband, but there was no question now that her life as the odd Mrs. Riddle was over. She would have to return to wizarding London at some point... she wondered if little Tom would grow up to be a wizard.

'But of course,' she whispered, remembering last night's vision of him grown-up, holding a wand, a terrifying snake-like warp on his brow... 'That doesn't have to happen,' she murmured, in a singing voice, so as not to wake the sleeping baby, 'I'll protect you. I'll give you the world, Tom, the world...'

For three days Merope stayed in the Stockwell Orphanage. It was, according to Mrs. Cole, only until she had the strength to get up and walk around. The mornings brought cool, gummy porridge; the afternoons meant broth and tea. Merope never complained. She was on these Muggles' charity, an uncomfortable position for her, and she did not forget it.

Meanwhile, she was allowed to keep Tom with her. For that she was grateful. He was her family now, and she his. All they had was each other. Tom very rarely cried, most likely because his mother was right there with him the whole time, and so he did not need to attract attention to himself. Merope imagined that Tom was content and that thought pleased her. She hoped she could always keep him content.

On the fourth day of January (for Tom was born at 11:22, the night of December 31st), Merope was able to walk around without her legs shaking. It was enough to take her to Diagon Alley. Mrs. Cole handed her a castoff old dress that was the colour of eggplant; it was made of rough-spun wool and drab as they come. Merope accepted the dress because she could not walk around London in a tattered nightgown. She also accepted a pair of clogs that would protect her feet from the snow.

'We don't give away clothes,' Mrs. Cole told her, pursing her lips, 'but in this case we'll make an exception. It's the Christian thing to do.'

'Be sure to thank the Christians for me, then,' said Merope.

A look of consternation had appeared on Mrs. Cole's face, although Merope could never understand the fuss about Christianity, having no part in its beliefs. If it meant a dress she was prepared to give thanks.

There was no sense of leaving the Stockwell Orphanage, for leaving meant packing up one's things, saying goodbyes, promising to write. Merope had nothing to pack, no one to say goodbye to, and she would never write to Muggles. They wouldn't know what to do with an owl, for one thing. So when she was dressed and her feet were inside the uncomfortable wooden clogs, and Tom was wrapped up against the cold and cradled in her arms, Merope walked out the door.

Behind her, Mrs. Cole closed the door and sighed in relief. The matron could not put her finger on why, but she felt as though she had narrowly escaped something bad. It was good to see the back of the once-pregnant Merope and her strange son, Tom Marvolo Riddle.

## Chapter Two

Tears streamed down Merope's cheeks. She shivered in cold and humiliation; for the fifth time, she had been turned down for a job. In her arms, Tom wailed in hunger and in cold, but Merope had not eaten for two days; her milk was drying up. Not for the first time, her resolution to keep the baby wavered. It would be so easy to just hand him back to the Muggle orphanage where he would be fed by the wet-nurse, and kept warm and dry, at least for a little while...

Diagon Alley was not crowded on the day that Merope staggered along the cobblestones. The weather was too inclement. 1927 was coming in like a lion.

She had first tried Mr. Burke at that shop on Knockturn Alley. She had made vague hints about the existence of other treasures, like the locket she had sold to him, but Burke's face closed up the minute she walked in the door. The shopkeeper had a shifty look about him. It made Merope wonder if she had been gypped on that locket.

'Someday I'll find it again for you,' she had whispered to Tom, always in her arms.

Next she had tried Magical Menagerie, because she was a Parselmouth. A single hissed word to one of their snakes and the shop-witch had shrieked in terror and ordered her off the premises.

Then came Flourish and Blotts; Merope could read, unlike her brother Morfin, and had always thought it rather set her apart. But the proprietor of the bookshop had looked down his nose at Merope in her dirty dress, with a newborn babe in her arms, and snubbed her without a word.

'Someday, you will be a clever boy,' Merope had whispered to Tom. 'I'll make sure you go to school.'

The Leaky Cauldron had been an option. Merope knew how to cook and clean. When she walked into the pub on an empty evening, she went to the barkeep, old Tom. She had explained her situation, her desperation, and emphasized that she could talk to Muggles if she had to. After all, the Leaky Cauldron was the bridge between worlds.

'I have a child, and I have no money,' Merope had said, holding up baby Tom. 'He's a good boy, see, and he shares your name, sir.'

Old Tom the barkeep had leered at her. 'Not mine, is he?' he asked, gesturing at the infant.

No, the Leaky Cauldron was not an option any longer.

The fingers of panic brushed at Merope's mind then. The world was closing in on her, cold and hard and unforgiving, and she was hungry. Starving. Not a single witch or wizard in London recognized her or would help her. Merope knew she was peculiar-looking, and she knew she lacked social graces that would allow her to finagle her way into a better situation. Her only life experience had been living in the hovel of her family home, then living as a Muggle with Tom. In neither instance had her ability as a witch developed properly.

It occurred to her as she paced up and down Diagon Alley that she knew as little about the workings of the wizarding world as any old Muggle that might have stumbled upon it.

Finally, Merope had gone back down Knockturn Alley and tried Mr. Burke again. She pleaded with him, cajoled, made empty promises, even hinted at the unthinkable: that he might have a chance at her body if only he hired her. And he told her, 'Get out of my shop, and don't ever come back!'

It had been Merope's bad luck that several other people had been in the store, including a tall blonde wizard in luxurious robes with an arrogant sneer on his face. Mr. Burke probably did not want his customers thinking that he would hire the likes of her; to employ a desperate mother would smack too much of kindness. Knockturn Alley did not sell kindness in any quantity.

Merope's tears dried on her cheeks, not because they stopped but because the air was too cold to sustain them. She slumped up against a column of Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Tom cried louder.

'Shhh,' she urged him. 'Hush, now, don't cry. Everything will be all right.' Her own words made her break into cleaving sobs again. She could lie to other people but not to her own son. Everything would not be all right.

In the range of her vision Merope was dimly aware of feet shuffling past her, into and out of the bank, people who had money and reasons. Her shaking hands grabbed her scarf and tore it from her hair; she folded it hastily and held it out in a sort of bowl shape. It had come to this, to begging on the street in front of the intimidating marble façade of Gringotts. Several wizards scoffed at her; one threw a single Knut on the ground, making Merope scramble to pick it up. Tom had stopped crying.

'Please,' she whispered, lifting her face to the tall figures hurrying past her. 'Please help me. Do have money, sir?' It was as though she were invisible. Witches and wizards got uncomfortable looks on their faces at about ten paces from her. They looked anywhere but at her. 'Money for my baby? Please?'

Merope wanted to cry again at her undignified display. It was utter degradation. She knew that she herself would never stop for a beggar. Had never stopped. Yet here she was, destitute, holding a too-quiet infant in one arm and holding the other arm out for a helping hand that no one would offer.

An hour passed. Merope knew this from the great public clock that sounded above the street. It felt an eternity of cold. Whoever said hell was hot? They were wrong. It was frozen, still, repetitious. She used both hands to rock Tom back and forth, reassuring him that she was there, and she left the scarf in a dark square in front of her. A measly few coins gleamed in the pale snowy light.

'It looks as though you could use a nice hot bowl of soup,' said a cheery voice above her.

Merope blinked up into the snow. An apparition leaned over her of a man in blue velvet dress robes and a star-spangled hat. He had a long auburn beard and very bright blue eyes surrounded by tiny, merry, crow's feet wrinkles.

'Can you stand up?' he asked her.

For a moment Merope was not sure she could. But then she nodded and snatched up her little scarf with coins. Holding Tom close to her body, her knees knocked together in weakness as she stood, and the auburn-haired man held out a hand to support her elbow.

'The goblins were complaining about you,' the man said, setting off at a jaunty pace through the snow as if it were a beautiful spring day. Merope hurried to keep up with his tall stride. 'They were going to send one of their trolls out to remove you.'

Merope gasped in horror, but then she saw the twinkle in the man's blue eyes that told her it was a joke. She tried to laugh. 'A troll for me?'

'But see, everything's going to be all right now, for you and your little one,' he said. 'We'll go to the Leaky Cauldron.'

Not wanting to be rude, Merope did not protest, although she didn't want to see old Tom the barkeep again. Her wooden cogs scuffed through the snow and inexplicably, the motion of her feet forward rekindled a spark of hope. This man would help her. She trusted him, though she did not know why.

The door of the Leaky Cauldron jangled in the frame as they stepped inside.

'Albus!' said old Tom from behind the bar. 'Hiya.'

'Greetings,' said the man called Albus. He gestured at a small wooden table. 'Please, sit,' he told Merope. 'Is the baby – er – hungry?'

Merope simply nodded, too embarrassed to tell a stranger that her breast milk had stopped.

An elderly witch shuffled over to them with a notepad in her hands.

The blue-eyed man smiled up at her. 'Gladys, good to see you. Can you fetch us a cup of warm goat's milk, please, and a clean rag?'

Gladys grunted and shuffled back off.

'The baby can drink goat's milk,' he said. 'I read of the technique in a story about a human child raised by giants.'

'Who are you?' Merope blurted.

'Oh!' he said, as though surprised. 'I am sorry. My name is Albus Dumbledore.' He held a hand out across the table.

Merope shook it with what she knew was an ice-cold hand.

'And you are...' he prompted.

'Merope,' she said. 'Merope...Riddle.' Her married name came out without her intention of it. A name, so simple, so hard to give up. A small practical voice also told her that the name of Gaunt was not what it used to be in the wizarding world.

'Riddle,' said Dumbledore. 'I'm not familiar with that name.' It was a polite way of asking if she was a pure-blood witch.

'It was my husband's name,' Merope explained hastily. Her jaw wanted to chatter as she warmed up in the cozy pub. 'He's dead.'

'Ohh,' said Dumbledore. 'My sympathies.' He glanced down at the infant Tom, asleep in Merope's arms.

'My son Tom,' Merope said. A twinge of pride accompanied her words. 'He's... all I have left... of my husband.'

'He can't be older than a month,' said Dumbledore.

'A week,' said Merope.

Gladys the waitress reappeared at their table with the goat's milk. Dumbledore asked her for two hot bowls of stew, a loaf of bread, and two pints of spiced pumpkin juice. Merope's mouth watered at the thought of it, but she glanced down at the rough boards of the table as Dumbledore ordered their meal.

'Nothing like a stew on a day like today,' said Dumbledore expansively. 'Warms the soul.'

Merope was silent. Her situation was reinforced of utter helplessness, a feeling she disliked intensely. She did not even know this man Dumbledore. He could be trying to take advantage of her. She held Tom a little closer to her thin body, jiggling him to wake him up. She could feel Dumbledore's eyes on her as she folded the clean rag into a triangle and dipped it into the milk, then

brought it to Tom's lips. His eyes got a little brighter and soon he was sucking happily at the sodden cloth.

'Mrs. Riddle, I want to offer you my help,' Dumbledore said. 'You're quite obviously in need of it, and no matter what your experience might be of wizard-kind, most people are inherently good. You will find help if you ask for it.'

'I don't need your charity,' Merope mumbled.

'Not charity,' said Dumbledore. 'Help.'

Merope's mouth twisted. 'I don't know anything,' she said. 'No education. I'm almost a Squib.'

'Not all places in the wizarding world require deft skills at wand-waving, Mrs. Riddle. I'm sure you can find your way, if you allow me to aid you.'

'What can you do for me?' Merope asked quietly. A horrible thought occurred to her that this man wanted to sell her into indentured servitude, or even...

'I am a professor at Hogwarts School,' Dumbledore said. 'The professor of Transfiguration, in fact.'

Her eyes widened. A professor? No wonder he had such fine robes and hat. Looking more closely at Dumbledore, she could see he had an air of competence, of self-assurance about him. She also thought he was older than he appeared; his hair was vibrant in colour, but the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth must have made him at least eighty years old. For a wizard, late middle age.

'Hogwarts,' she whispered. It was a name full of mystery and promise. Merope was so closely associated with the school, yet she had never seen it, never had the chance to go there herself. What a fitting end for the last heirs of Slytherin, Salazar who was himself outcast.

'You do not have a magical education?' Dumbledore asked.

'N-no,' said Merope. 'I couldn't – my father, he didn't want – I never went to school.'

'I see,' said Dumbledore. 'I take it you've had difficulty getting a job, if you have looked.'

'Of course I looked,' Merope stammered quickly. She was not lazy or useless. 'I asked here.'

As she said it, Gladys brought their stew and bread, and Dumbledore inclined his head and waved his hand at the meal, allowing the pause in conversation so Merope could eat.

Eat she did. Nothing had ever tasted so good as that hearty beef stew, rich with potatoes and vegetables, and the warm brown bread with a pat of butter melting on it. With each bite Merope felt strength return to her. She did her best not to eat messily or hastily. Ill manners would remind her of her brother and father.

When her spoon hit the bottom of the large bowl, Merope felt full for the first time in weeks. She looked back up at Dumbledore. 'Can I go to Hogwarts?' she asked.

He shook his head slightly. 'I'm afraid that's not possible,' he said. 'The age restrictions... you are of age?'

'Eighteen.'

'Mmm,' he said. 'No, Hogwarts cannot admit you... but I can help you get a job. What are your skills?'

'My skills?' Merope echoed. Did he not hear her say she was practically a Squib? 'I told you, I have no schooling.'

'That, Mrs. Riddle, does not mean you lack skills,' Dumbledore said. His piercing blue eyes looked straight into her. 'What did you do at home? Cook or clean? Did you have a job when you were married?'

A squirm of shame went through her. She barely knew domestic spells for cooking and cleaning; her father had beaten it out of her. And with her husband, the only magic she'd done had been to brew the Amortentia potion, and that only for the minimum dose... 'I guess I can make potions,' she mumbled under her breath.

'I didn't quite catch that,' said Dumbledore. 'What did you say?'

'Potions,' she squeaked a little louder. 'I can make potions.'

A smile lit Dumbledore's face. 'Excellent! You know ingredients, then?'

Merope gave a small, tentative nod.

'That settles it,' said Dumbledore. 'I'll take you to Slug and Jiggers. The Apothecary. Old Mr. Jiggers owes me a favour, and I'm sure he can use a clerk. Would you be willing to work there?'

Unable to tear her gaze away from her saviour, Merope stared at Dumbledore, half-amazed that she hadn't thought of the apothecary herself. For a shining moment, she allowed a full measure of hope to flood her being. Dumbledore looked so confident that she could not help but be confident, too.

'I'm not sure I could find anything else,' Dumbledore cautioned. 'The economy's taking a downturn, you know, and old friends only go so far...'

Merope realised that she had not answered Dumbledore. He must think she did not want the opportunity. 'Oh, no,' she breathed, 'I want to work at the apothecary. Please. I want to work.'

He leaned back with a satisfied air. 'Good,' he said. 'Good.' Albus Dumbledore was true to his word. After their meal at the Leaky Cauldron, they made the short walk to Slug and Jiggers Apothecary. Merope wished for a moment that she could put Tom somewhere, because a brand-new mother hardly looked like a competent shopkeeper, but Dumbledore waved her off when she suggested it.

'Old Jigger has a soft spot for kids,' he said. 'Has a couple of grandchildren, if I remember correctly...' He pushed open the door to the apothecary and allowed Merope to walk in first. She wanted to put her hand over her mouth and nose; the place smelled utterly foul, a thick medley of cabbage and rotten eggs.

Dumbledore seemed not to notice. He raised a hand in greeting. 'Ah, Murdock! Fine day!'

'Albus,' said an old man with an enormous quivering silver mustache and owlish eyeglasses. Murdock Jigger's eyes blinked. He must have been smiling, but it was hard to tell beneath the mustache. 'Freezing outside, my fresh flobberworms have ice on them.'

'Sorry to hear that,' said Dumbledore. 'Reminds me of my Aunt Beryl, who used to eat flobberworms straight from the ice box... she did love them. A delicacy, she always said.'

'I would not know,' said Jigger with a quaver of laughter, or disgust, in his voice. 'But what brings you so far from your school on a day like today, Albus?'

'Business,' said Dumbledore airily. 'But I ran into this young woman and thought of you, Murdock – she's some talent with potions ingredients, as I understand. I recall you said you needed a new clerk? I hope the position has not been filled.'

As though noticing Merope for the first time, Jigger adjusted his glasses and peered at her. 'Hmm,' he said. His eyes fell on the sleeping bundle that was Tom and he tilted his head. Merope was reminded of a large owl looking at an insect and felt uneasy under the scrutiny.

'Ingredients, huh?' Jigger said. 'Well, girl? Can you tell an asphodel root from ginger?'

'Y-yes,' Merope said quietly.

'Speak up, then!' said Jigger. 'Glumbumble fluid from bubotuber pus?'

Merope nodded.

'What's this?' He seized a large glass jar from a shelf and shook it at her.

'E-erumpent horns, sir.'

'Huh,' said Jigger. 'All right. My clerk quit two weeks ago to seek his fortune in Jamaica. Personally, I think he just wants to loll about on the beach all day...' He sounded jealous of a warm beach. 'Anyway, what will you do with your boy when you're working?'

'How did you know he's a boy?' Merope asked, suspicious.

'Fifty-fifty guess, innit?' Jigger shrugged.

'Perhaps she can keep the child with her,' Dumbledore suggested. 'He's really too young to be apart from his mother. It won't interfere with chopping ingredients and ringing up customers, now, Murdock.'

'I 'spose not,' said Jigger. 'What's his name?'

'Tom,' said Merope.

'Huh.' Jigger scratched his nose and blinked down at Tom's sleeping face. 'What's your name?'

'Mrs. Merope Riddle,' said Merope, committed now to using her married name in the wizarding world.

'She's a recent widow,' Dumbledore volunteered.

'I see, I see,' said Jigger. 'Well, fine. Mrs. Riddle, you have a job.'

Merope barely got a chance to thank them, for Jigger and Dumbledore launched into conversation about people she did not know, and then Dumbledore bought a bag of ground moonstone, leaving her quite abruptly with a tip of his hat and a good wish.

There was a moment of awkward silence in the shop. Jigger cleared his throat; Merope shifted on both feet. Then Tom let out a great, noisy yawn and opened his eyes, gazing about the place. Jigger chuckled.

'A bright one, that is,' he said.

'Yes,' she murmured.

'Right, then. You'll start today, no time to waste. Have any personal effects?'

Merope almost laughed. Personal effects? Only if you counted her baby, worn like an accessory on her arm. 'No, sir,' she said.

'Fine. There's a room upstairs that my last clerk used as a flat. You can stay there. Come on, then, keep up.' Jigger wound his way past shelves and cauldrons and vats of unidentifiable substances. He talked over his shoulder to her. 'This here's the back storeroom, and there's a door that leads to the courtyard, where we keep live lobsters and the frozen ashwinder eggs and such. The freezer's out there, as well, not that we need it in this weather... come on, up the stairs...'

She followed him up an ancient, narrow stairwell. Each floorboard had a creak all to its own, creating a musical series of notes as their feet took them up. There was a landing at the top and a low door. Jigger brought out a rusty skeleton key and turned the lock. 'Here,' he said, handing her the key. 'Just keep the place clean. My second-to-last clerk spilled an entire cauldron of Dreamless Draught and it leaked through the floor, onto the heads of my customers...' He coughed as though in severe disapproval. Merope thought that Mr. Jigger had a great deal of trouble with his clerks. She hoped not to disappoint him.

'Bed, table, stove,' Jigger gestured around the room. It was more spacious than Merope would have imagined, although full of strange angles and oddly-shaped windows. The vague sulfur smell from downstairs permeated the room and there was a layer of dust on everything. 'Water closet is over there,' he said, waving at a half-wide wooden door to their left. 'I'll leave you here for a minute to get settled. Be down in the shop in an hour.'

'Y-yes, sir,' Merope said.

The door closed after Jigger, leaving Merope standing in the middle of the old room, holding the key in her hand. She sighed. It was nothing to write home about, that was certain. The double bed was crafted of wrought iron and covered by a frayed quilt; it sagged in the middle. There were dingy lace curtains on the windows. A grouping of random wooden chairs surrounded a black woodstove in one corner; in the other corner was the kitchen area, with a cooking stove and oven, a butcher's block, and a single shelf tacked to the wall. There was a jar of oil there and several pots and pans hanging from hooks.

Wandering over to the water closet, Merope opened the door and peered inside. Rustic. Antiquated. In need of a good clean. But it would do.

'Let's set you down,' she told Tom. She placed him on the bed where he waved his little arms and legs, never taking his eyes off his mother.

The windows had a view of the rooftops and, if she tilted her head at the right angle, the street itself. Merope fingered the lace curtain, imagining it when it was new and frothy and pure white. Against the snow outside, the curtain looked positively brown. She would replace the curtains first, once she had some money. Staring around the rest of the room, Merope brought out her wand. She lit three candles of a candelabra on the wooden table. Afraid her strength would give out if she allowed herself to rest, Merope stayed in motion, refusing to sit, even though the wooden rocking chair beckoned her. Instead she lit a fire in the stove to warm the chilly room.

With a deep breath, she pointed her wand at the top of the table. 'Evanesco,' she muttered. Nothing happened. A memory flashed back to her of her father, screaming at her, calling her useless, unable to do even basic magic. She winced. 'Evanesco!' she said, more forcefully. A whooshing noise and the dust and grime vanished from the table.

'Ha!' Merope blurted.

After that, it was easy. She Vanished the layers of dust, the built-up grease and grime on the cooking stove, and even tackled the cobwebs in the water closet before Tom started to cry again.

Merope glanced down at her breasts. Could she try? She did not think that one meal at the Leaky Cauldron would re-start her ability to nurse. It was a terrible feeling to listen to those helpless infant cries. Guilt intruded; she was a bad mother. Unable to feed her own child. She put her hand on Tom's forehead. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered to him. 'I have nothing for you. I know you're hungry. I know...'

Tom's cries got louder. Merope stared down at his red, squalling face. 'Oh,' she said, picking him up, and felt... a rather damp spot. 'Oh!'

She unwrapped his swaddling clothes and, seeing the surprise, laughed aloud. 'Evanesco!' she said triumphantly. The diaper was spotlessly clean once more. Tom stopped crying at once and Merope used the corner of his blanket to wipe his tiny button of a nose. 'There's my son,' she cooed, rocking him back and forth. He let out a contented baby noise and Merope's heart flooded once more with feeling for him. He had to be the most precious baby that ever lived.

'No, the boomslang skin, you silly girl!'

Merope's hands scurried along the shelf, seeking the correct jar, although she was not sure what boomslang skin even looked like. She had exaggerated her potions-making abilities a tad; her expertise lay in the art of love potions. It did not help that Slug and Jiggers Apothecary was a disorganised mess of ingredients and supplies, with no labels or prices on the shelves. Every time Merope made a sale she had to look up the price in the massive book on the counter, then record it with painstaking, tiny letters in the ledger. She had memorised the price of basic items such as black beetle eyes (3 Knuts per scoop) and dragon's liver (14 Sickles per ounce).

But boomslang skin? It was rarely used in potions and Merope had never seen evidence of it in the shop.

'I might just go to Knockturn Alley,' she heard the customer say to Mr. Jigger.

'No!' Jigger said, 'no, we have it, I assure you – Merope, hurry!'

Heart pounding, she snatched up a large jar of what looked like the shed skins of a snake. She prayed it was boomslang skin. 'Sir!' she said, thrusting the jar into Jigger's hands.

'See, now,' he mollified the customer, an older wizard with a hooked nose. 'Boomslang skin. Two Galleons per ounce.'

Merope slunk back behind the shelves, reminding herself to breathe. She hated being shouted at. It reminded her too much of home. However, it was rare that Jigger shouted at her; it was only when he

got flustered. Merope knew it was not personal, although it felt like it. In fact, Merope enjoyed her job most days. She was learning a great deal about potions. Her experience and education had been so limited in Little Hangleton that every time she helped a customer, or listened to Mr. Jigger, she learned something new.

In the corner of the shop, near the cash register, a small wooden bassinet contained baby Tom, who occupied his time by chewing on his toes. There was a tiny mobile fixed above his head, put there by Mr. Jigger, who did love children. The mobile was charmed to whir around and dance for Tom; there was a turtle, a dog, a cat, and an owl that chased each other in continuum. The dog chased the cat chased the owl chased the turtle, which always looked to move a bit slower to Merope. She wondered if one of these days the owl would catch up and throw the whole thing out of balance.

When Jigger was out of the shop, Merope would chatter things to Tom; tell him what kind of root she was chopping, for instance, or what sort of vegetables she'd bought for dinner. She would sing him lullabies, dark tales of Salazar, and her thin warbly voice would sound almost pretty as she crooned. When Jigger was in the shop, Merope was silent as the grave, for she was shy and unconfident in her right to be working there.

The salary of an apothecary's assistant was not very much, a mere 30 Galleons per month, but with the flat provided, Merope stretched her salary as far as she could. She'd bought herself a set of robes, simple black broadcloth for working in the shop, and some shoes. Tom got a proper baby's dress and diapers. The rest was extended to pay for groceries. In the winter, everything cost more.

With a jingle, the door shut as the boomslang customer left. Jigger's head peeked around the shelf, blinking at Merope, and his mustache twitched. 'There, now, Merope, that wasn't so hard.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' she said quietly. 'I couldn't remember where it was.'

'Well now you know,' he said. 'I'm going home for lunch. Can you mind things for me?'

'I- I suppose so, sir.'

'All right. If there's a leftover roast beef sandwich, I'll bring one for you. Mrs. Jigger makes a mean sandwich, she does... Don't burn the shop down, now.' He reached for his overcoat and hat, and caught the expression on Merope's face. 'I was joking!' Clang. He was out the door.

Finally Merope's hands could relax. She twisted them together and let out a deep sigh. Everything was eggshells in an apothecary. Merope could not help but feel clumsy and inadequate. She walked over to Tom's bassinet, gazing down at her son, reminding herself why she was doing this in the first place.

Tom stared back at her. His eyes were frighteningly intense. Sometimes Merope wondered if it was normal for so young a child to be so aware of everything. It made her feel like talking to him as an equal. 'It's all for you,' she told him. 'All of this. I want to make your world perfect. Clean. Beautiful. We'll get there, Tom, you just wait and see.'

## Chapter Three

'Tom, don't touch that!' Merope snatched Tom's questing hand away from the simmering cauldron. 'You'll burn yourself!'

'Cawdron!' Tom declared, pointing at it.

'Yes, yes,' said Merope. She pulled two-year-old Tom Marvolo Riddle into her lap. They did not call it the 'terrible twos' for nothing. Ever since he learned to toddle around on his own, Tom had been getting into trouble all over the place. Even Mr. Jigger had scolded him yesterday, and Mr. Jigger hardly ever raised his voice for anything. 'Do you want your teddy?'

Tom nodded.

'Accio Teddy Bear!' Merope flicked her wand to summon the toy from across the shop. 'Here.'

She plunked Tom down on the floor and told him to play quietly. As if he would. Merope looked at her son with a mixture of exasperation and affection. His hair was raven-dark, with a fine luster to it, just like his father. It was too early to tell what he would look like, but every day Merope prayed that he might be handsome like her ex-husband. She would not wish her own looks upon anyone.

Brushing her limp brown hair out of her eyes, Merope stood up on her aching feet. It had been a long day already. She had a fresh shipment of cough potions to sort out and she had to write up the weekly accounts. At least she knew her way around the shop by now. Just last week, Mr. Jigger had given her a raise of 5 Galleons and told her she'd turned out to be a better clerk than he expected. The praise still tickled her.

It was February, 1929. The days went by, days with little Tom, days without his father. Merope had long replaced the curtains in the flat upstairs. Tom now had his own small child's bed, placed at the foot of Merope's.

'Mummy, I want a sweet,' said Tom.

'Later,' said Merope, distracted by her accounts. Jigger was in the back room, wrestling with a couple of Venomous Tentaculas in wait of harvest. As she wrote down the week's balance with a scrawny quill, it registered how amazing it was that Tom could speak to her like that. It might have been mother's pride, but he seemed to develop faster than other children she'd heard of; certainly Mrs. Jigger said so. Elayna Jigger (who was quite a bit younger than Mr. Jigger) would know; she had five children herself.

Tom had been speaking in full subject-verb sentences by twelve months; at twenty-four months he was able to converse like a boy twice his age. His eyes took in everything and he was quick to observe the world around him. Merope was undeniably proud of her son's skill. However, he had yet to show signs of magic. Many toddlers did not, though Merope kept hoping that someday soon, Tom would reach that milestone.

'Did those specialty orders come in?' Jigger stepped into the main shop, hanging his hat on the hook reserved for it. 'You know, for the Malfoys?'

'No sir, not yet,' said Merope. 'They have to go through customs first. You've received an owl from the Ministry saying that the vials are awaiting inspection.'

'All right, then,' said Jigger. 'And those Pepper-Up potions need to be ready to go. Flu season is upon us.'

'It's brewing over there,' said Merope, nodding toward the cauldron, and then she stood up abruptly. Tom, curse the child, had abandoned his teddy bear and was now pulling random jars off a lower shelf, shaking them, trying to put them in his mouth...

'Tom, stop that!' Merope cried. 'What did I tell you about playing quietly?'

'I am quiet,' Tom said in his tiny, clear, baby's voice.

'No, you're not. You're in trouble. Those jars are not for playing with...'

'Merope, really,' said Jigger. 'It was fine when he was a baby, but now he's throwing my shop into disarray –'

'I know, I'm sorry,' Merope said desperately, dragging Tom away from the jars. 'Can't you stay out of things?' she hissed at him.

He just blinked at her with wide innocence.

Merope rolled her own strange eyes. Now she had to put away the jars he'd disturbed and finish the accounts, all under the watchful eye of Mr. Jigger. He was a fine employer, competent at what he did, but Merope had no prior experience with authority figures other than her abusive father. A small, cringing part of her kept expecting Jigger to turn on her.

Tom's behaviour certainly did not help. She wanted to put him in a cage where he could not get into things. The apothecary shop was very crowded, however, with no room for a toddler contraption. 'Here,' she said, feeling at her wit's end. She snatched up a stick lolly from the jar Mr. Jigger kept out on the counter. 'Here's a sweet.'

Tom took it from her and put it in his mouth, still staring.

'You should teach him some manners,' remarked Jigger from behind the counter. 'Please and thank you.'

Merope furrowed her brow. She had never been taught courtesy from her family... but her husband, Tom Riddle the elder... now he had been a model of good manners. Although a Muggle, he was an aristocrat, educated at Harrow and Oxford, and Merope remembered that he said 'please' and 'thank you' for everything. 'Please, dear, pass the jam.' She would hand it to him with her supplicant's smile, even though she was the one with the power he knew not. 'Thank you, darling.'

Her husband would want his child to have manners, Merope thought... but then she remembered that her husband did not want his child at all. An invisible vise squeezed at her heart.

'Say thank you, Tom,' she told her son.

'Why?' he asked.

'Because it's polite,' she said.

'Thank you,' he said.

'There's a good boy.' Merope patted him on the head.

With a sigh she settled down to put the disturbed jars back on the shelf. They had no particular order and as she replaced them, she wished that things were more organised. She still had trouble finding things; Jigger tended to know his own mess, but put things in strange places without informing Merope. She turned a jar over in her hands, watching the dried caterpillars inside slide back and forth.

Then the idea came to her, something she could do to improve things: categorise the shop. She could make an inventory of everything. She could make labels for the shelves, alphabetise the stock, and then when customers came into the shop, they would not have to ask her for help in finding simple items like bat's wings. They could go to the 'B' section and find it themselves. It would cut down on the amount of work Merope had to do.

'Mr. Jigger,' she said, 'can I ask you something?' Her heart fluttered in her chest at the sudden boldness of presenting her idea. In over two years of working here, Merope had never taken the initiative, she had just followed his orders, his methods...

'Yes?' he said, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

'I was just thinking... I had an idea... I thought, maybe, er...'

'Spit it out, girl!'

'I thought about organising the stock,' she said.

'Organising?' said Jigger, as though the concept were utterly foreign to him.

'Putting things in alphabet order, and labels on the shelves. That way we would know how much we have, and when to order more... it wouldn't be like last week, when we ran out of rat tails.' That had been a disaster, and Merope had needed to take an illicit swallow of Calming Draught to soothe her anxiety. As she spoke out, however, she became more impassioned about her organisation idea; it would help her feel more confident in her abilities.

'Huh,' said Jigger. He rubbed his chin and looked sceptical.

'Please, Mr. Jigger? It would improve the shop.' Merope could not shake the feeling that if he rejected the idea, it was personal.

For a few agonising minutes he thought it over. Then he nodded once, twice, three times. 'If you want to do it, be my guest. It'll make Mrs. Jigger happy, she's suggested the same thing many a time. I have little inclination to be organised, m'self, but if you want to, then it's up to you.'

Merope smiled.

'Tom, come over here and sit on my lap. I've gotten you a new book to read.' Merope sat in the rocking chair next to the roaring woodstove. It was a chilly, rainy day in March and the winter weather showed no inclination of leaving. Tom tottered over on unsteady legs into Merope's open arms.

'A book, Mummy?'

'That's right. It's a book of fairy tales. You'll like it,' she said. Merope herself loved fairy tales, despite her disillusionment of their endings. Through the desperate misery of her formative years as a girl, she had believed that someday, somehow, she would better herself. That her life would be clean and shining. For awhile it had been, but the veneer had been only as thin as the potion she brewed to create her illusion. When she released Tom Riddle Sr. from the enchantment, reality shattered her careful dreams, and Merope was cast back into the *prima forma* from whence she came. An ugly, odd-looking, magically weak witch with a belly distended by child.

But things were not quite the same, of course. Now she had little Tom who gazed at her with such pure trust. She had a job and over 250 Galleons saved and stored in a box beneath the floorboards. The room in which they lived was simple, of course, but Merope had hung fresh white curtains, bought a second-hand rag rug to cover the floor, and put up strings of herbs to make the place smell sweet.

Just that day, she had finished the massive project of store inventory and had organised, labelled, and alphabetised the store. Mr. Jigger had been so impressed with the end result that he'd given her a bonus of ten Galleons. Thrilled, Merope had run across the way to

Flourish and Blotts, where she proudly bought a children's book of stories for Tom. It was a glorious feeling to hand over her own money, to buy something special for her own child. The snooty proprietor of the bookstore had not recognised Merope as the woman he'd turned down for a job two years previous.

Tom played with her long braid of hair as she turned pages of the picture book with her wand. 'See, Tom, there's the great turtle Kurma, who holds the earth on his back.'

'The world is on the turtle, Mummy?'

'Well, no. It's just a story.'

'Oh.' Tom sounded disappointed.

'But maybe it does,' Merope said to hold Tom's interest in the book. 'Sometimes things aren't what they seem at first. Truth can be turned into a story or a myth.' She thought about all the stories told by her father about the great Salazar Slytherin. It was an uncomfortable memory, thinking of that 'great' blood that ran in her veins, blood so dissipated now. She was one notch above a Squib, and lucky that potions-making did not require vast amounts of magic, but rather cunning and patience.

'I believe some fairy tales can be true,' Merope told Tom, wanting with her heart to believe it.

'You would be the princess,' he said, wrapping his little hands around her arm.

She hugged him close.

Of all the laws of witches, it was the Law of Three that could be such a slap in the face. Everything happened in threes. Any old housewife gossiping in her kitchen knew it. Although the Law of Three was not written down or codified in the wizarding world, its vagaries were still known to the ones who chose to remember it.

Merope knew about the Law of Three. It had hit her that day when the Ministry wizards came to their shack in the woods near Little Hangleton. Her brother was sent to Azkaban. Her father was sent to Azkaban. And she, for the first time in her life, had spoken to the

dashing Tom Riddle. He had snubbed her, of course, but in a very polite and upturned-nose sort of way. The triple incident had set Merope's mind onto the convoluted course that would lead her to act on her great ambition, to brew the most potent love potion in the world, to drug Tom Riddle into loving her. Yes, things happened in threes.

It was a languid day in August that Merope learned it again. She was minding the shop while Jigger brewed up batches of Dreamless Sleep Draught to be sold ready-made. The door made the familiar jingling call that meant a customer had entered the store. Merope looked up.

It was Albus Dumbledore. He wore summer robes and a bright yellow tie. 'Well, hello!' he said cheerily, tipping his hat as he took it off his head. Blue eyes winked at her.

'Good afternoon, sir,' Merope said politely, as she'd taught herself, as she'd learned from watching her boss.

'Mrs. Riddle, am I correct?'

She nodded.

'Indeed, indeed,' said Dumbledore. 'Beautiful day outside.'

'I 'spose it is, sir,' said Merope. She had not seen the sunshine, having been stuck inside for the entire summer; she must be the only witch in Britain without a tan to warm her pallid skin.

Dumbledore ambled along the rows. 'This shop looks different. Has it been re-organised, Murdock?' he asked, addressing Jigger who stirred three different cauldrons. Jigger's glasses were fogged up.

'Albus! Yes, that was my assistant's idea.'

'A fine idea, Mrs. Riddle,' said Dumbledore. 'I often find that to clear one's space is to clear one's mind. Of course, my office is far too cluttered, and I do hope it is not a reflection on my internal thoughts.' He picked up a hollowed seashell and inspected it. 'The shell of the fire-crab. How interesting.'

'Only 10 Sickles apiece!' Jigger called.

Dumbledore laughed. 'Always the shopkeeper, Murdock. I – Oh!' Dumbledore exclaimed aloud and looked down. 'Hello, there.'

Tom stared back up at Dumbledore. 'Hello, sir,' he said, mimicking his mother. He said it almost too perfectly.

'What fine manners!' Dumbledore knelt down so that he was at Tom's diminutive height. 'And what is your name, young fellow?'

'Tom Riddle,' he said, face not cracking.

'Ah,' said Dumbledore. He glanced up at Merope.

She smiled at her son's manners, trying to shove away the disconcerting thought that Tom was like a sponge, absorbing her greetings to customers.

'My name is Dumbledore,' said the professor, smiling at Tom.

The toddler did not return the smile, but his brows came together for a moment in a comical expression of concentration; Merope knew he was trying to work out the name 'Dumbledore.' He could not pronounce it. However, instead of making the undignified attempt of trying to say it, Tom merely glanced down at Dumbledore's shoes.

'Has he shown any signs of magic, Mrs. Riddle?' Dumbledore asked, standing back up to his full height.

'No,' she said. 'No. Of course, he is – my husband was – he's half-blood.'

'Well, that's hardly a cause for lack of magic,' said Dumbledore. 'In fact, in my experience, half-bloods can be the most powerful.'

Merope made a small noise of disbelief and shook her head.

'He's still young, Merope,' Jigger contributed. 'My oldest, John, didn't show magic until he was six. And now he's a prefect at Hogwarts.'

Tom followed the conversation as each person spoke. From Tom's vantage point, conversation must have been a sport: each had a turn, the power of speech and communication passed around like a

ball. All the talk of Tom's magic had given her a brief flare of memory, a vision on the night he was born, the sight of him grown and angry and then transformed into a terrible thing with a wand in his right hand. But in the mundane daily activities of life, Merope forgot the vision that had led her to save her life for Tom's sake; in fact, sometimes she wondered if it had just been a fortuitous hallucination.

Surely the adorable 2 ½ year-old child could not grow to be the thing that Merope saw.

'What brings you to Diagon Alley today, Albus?' Jigger asked.

'Oh, Hogwarts business,' said Dumbledore. 'And a few personal stops in Muggle London. Had to go to Hamley's on Regent Street; they have the best selection of Muggle sweets. Picked up some lemon drops. Here, have one, they're brilliant.' Dumbledore fished around in his pocket and brought out a small paper bag. 'Here!' he urged Jigger, who looked askance at the idea of Muggle sweets.

Merope was curious. The Muggle world was a fascinating place, not the land of a dull, dirty underclass of which her father had always accused it. She would know, having lived as a Muggle, but she had never tasted a lemon drop.

The interest on her face must have been apparent, for Dumbledore extended the bag to her. 'Thank you,' she remembered to say. And the lemon drop was good, sweet and tart all at once.

'I want,' said a small voice from near the floor.

'I don't think so,' said Merope. She was worried he might choke on it.

'Aw,' said Dumbledore.

'I want!' Tom said, more insistently. The voice was warning of an imminent temper tantrum.

'No, Tom,' said Merope.

Dumbledore, who had started to hand a lemon drop to the boy, retracted his hand.

There was an odd rumbling noise. And then, as though split apart by an invisible knife, the bottom of the paper bag tore open, spilling lemon drops all over the floor, lemon drops into Tom's waiting hands.

'Tom!' Merope gasped.

'Reparo!' Dumbledore said, fixing the bag. With a quick sweep of his wand, the escaped lemon drops flew back inside as a flock of hard candy.

'My floor will be sticky!' Jigger protested.

'No, certainly not!' Dumbledore said, amusement in every inch of his face.

'I WANT SWEETS!' Tom screamed at the top of his lungs. He flung himself down onto the floor, crying and pounding his fists.

'Magic!' said Merope, over the toddler's cries.

'Accidental,' said Jigger.

'So he is a wizard,' said Dumbledore.

Tom's screaming got louder. Merope ran around the counter and knelt down by him, trying in vain to calm him down. She was embarrassed that he would make such a display in front of a Hogwarts professor.

As though unable to hear the shrieks of an upset child, Dumbledore peered down, bringing his face closer to Tom. A curious, almost concerned expression crossed the professor's face. 'He is...' and said something unintelligible over the din of Tom's tantrum.

'Eh, Albus?' Jigger asked, cocking an ear. 'Merope, will you shush that child!'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' she murmured.

'He should let it out,' Dumbledore said cheerfully.

Sure enough, after several intense moments, Tom wore out on screaming and curled into himself, hiccoughing dramatically. Merope picked him up and set him on her hip, producing a handkerchief to wipe his nose.

'This is the first time he's shown magic, you say?' Dumbledore asked.

She nodded.

'Hmm... that's very interesting,' he said. 'So young a child... of course, magic can show itself at any time, but that display was... he had a focused intention. He wanted a lemon drop. So he made the bag rip. Very interesting indeed, for so young a boy.'

'Does that mean he'll be a good wizard?' Merope asked hopefully. What pride she could take in her half-Muggle son then!

'A good wizard? I'm not sure,' said Dumbledore. 'A powerful wizard? I think so.' He adjusted his half-moon spectacles perched on his nose. 'Whether he is good or not, Mrs. Riddle, will depend on you.'

'Oh,' she said.

'Who did you say your parents were again?' Dumbledore asked.

'I didn't say,' she muttered. 'They don't matter.'

'Well,' said Dumbledore, 'I have always believed that too much stock is placed in wizarding bloodlines. Life is too surprising to be predicted by who one's parents were.'

'I don't know about that,' said Jigger. 'My father was an apothecary, his father was an apothecary, and his father before him was an apothecary. And my son John will be an apothecary.'

Merope stayed quiet, and tried to distract herself by patting Tom's hair into a neater pile on top of his little head. He was exhausted from the tantrum and had his thumb in his mouth, eyes closed, half-asleep.

'You'll send him to Hogwarts, I hope,' said Dumbledore.

'I hadn't thought about it,' Merope lied. 'The future... seems very far away.'

'It's always just around the corner, actually,' said Dumbledore. 'Don't fret. Tom's school days will be here before you know it!'

'Oh, but I couldn't afford to send him to school yet!' she blurted, then clapped her free hand over her mouth. Her father had always drilled into her that their financial situation was not something to be spoken of. It was a great game of pretending that they were still a great family.

'Again, not something to worry about,' said Dumbledore. 'We never turn down a young witch or wizard based on their parents' ability to pay fees. Besides, in... nine years, your account will be in fine shape, if you keep working for Murdock here. He's such a soft touch.'

Jigger looked mutinous at Dumbledore's words, as though they might force him into giving Merope another raise just to protect his honour. 'I'm not,' he said gruffly.

'I don't have an account,' said Merope. The idea of walking into Gringotts Wizarding Bank terrified her.

'Oh, but you should!' said Dumbledore. 'It'll make you feel better. Besides, if you've had a vault there for five years, they start sending you a special kookaburra feather quill every year. I rather collect them... that alone is worth it.'

Opening an account at Gringotts was something that had never crossed Merope's mind. Bank accounts were for rich people, people with assets to protect. They would laugh her out of the bank, those goblins with sharp teeth and mean little ears, pointing their fingers at her because she did not belong. It was humiliation waiting to happen.

'I couldn't do that,' she mumbled, embarrassed.

'Of course you could! Murdock will watch your son while you're gone, won't you, Murdock?'

'I 'spose I could,' said Jigger. 'Long as you're not gone more'n 'n hour.'

Feeling pressured, Merope hovered between ducking behind the shop counter, or grabbing her cloak before she lost her nerve.

'Go on,' said Dumbledore. 'Your little wizard here will be fine.'

Bullied into it by her boss and the Hogwarts professor, Merope conceded defeat and took her light summer cloak from the peg on the wall. 'I suppose I could,' she said.

'Don't forget a letter of recommendation,' advised Dumbledore.

Relief flooded her. 'I don't have one of those! I can't go.'

'Nonsense, we'll vouch for you.'

Merope stared in astonishment at the careless display of advanced magic as Dumbledore brought out his wand, and without a word conjured a letter, already composed, and a quill for him to sign. He scribbled across the bottom and the letter floated across the air to Jigger. 'Sign here, Murdock Jigger!' the quill announced, tapping at the spot on the parchment.

Jigger let out a small chuckle and shook his head as he signed. 'Dumbledore, really.'

'There, now. Off you go,' Dumbledore said.

Merope was ejected onto the crowded street with letter in hand. Tom was sleeping upstairs under the watchful ears of Jigger and Dumbledore, and she'd grabbed her bag of Galleons from beneath the floorboards. She kept patting it, afraid someone would steal it from her. The crowd pushed in on all sides. She felt ignored, as she always did on the street. No one looked twice at the slight figure of an ugly duckling.

The cobblestones made clicking noises beneath her scurrying feet as she made her way to Gringotts. She wanted to get this over with as soon as possible; she kept holding the image of Tom in her head, reminding herself that it was for him. Imagination was one of Merope's strong points. It had gotten her through those years of verbal abuse by her father, and her brother Morfin who – don't think

about it – and her powerful imaginings had allowed another world. A world where she was beautiful and loved.

Tom. It's all for Tom, who was her son. Merope was in front of the steps of Gringotts Wizarding Bank. She glanced at the pillar where she had slumped two and a half years ago, forlorn and starving in the snow. Taking a deep breath, she brought her foot up and landed on the first step; the rest of the steps were easy after that.

The inside of Gringotts was grand and very intimidating. There was a dull clamour, the sound of transactions, the clink of gold coins, the urgent undertones of business. Goblins scurried around carrying stacks of records in their hands. Others manned desks or greeted special customers. There was not a smile to be had in the place. Merope gulped and took a few steps on the black-and-gold marble floor. She felt shabby in her drab work robes and plain shoes.

'Can I help you?' a nearby goblin growled at her, looking put-out at her presence.

'I – uh –' she patted her pocket with her savings again. 'I want – would like – an account.'

'New accounts!' the goblin called out, hurrying away as a different goblin replaced him.

'This way,' said the goblin. 'My name is Greb. I deal with new accounts. Keep up, please.'

Merope let Greb the goblin lead her past a row of desks, down a corridor, up some stairs, down some stairs, and several turns past a frightening collection of carnivorous houseplants. She was all turned around and was positive she could not find her way back out of the bank.

'In here,' Greb said curtly. He led them into a large-ish room with dusty chandeliers hovering above their heads. Several other goblins were seated behind heavy desks, interviewing other witches and wizards. Merope saw a newlywed couple (they could not keep their hands off each other), a foreign wizard who looked Spanish, and a jabbering group of Japanese.

'Sit,' ordered the goblin.

She sat.

'Well? How much? What kind of account? What's your credit history?'

Merope blinked with each question, wanting nothing more than to run out of the bank and home to her little flat. Who did she think she was to be opening an account by herself? She heard echoes of recrimination in her head, most of them in voices other than her own. With shaking hands she presented the letter Dumbledore had given her.

Greb unrolled the parchment and scanned it. When he reached the names at the bottom, Merope heard a short hiss of breath. 'You've Albus Dumbledore to vouch for you, have you?' Greb asked.

'Y-yes,' said Merope. 'I have two hundred Galleons, see.' She brought out the bag of coins and put it on the desk.

Greb eyed it. 'Huh.' He took out a quill and started scribbling on a fresh piece of parchment. Then he grabbed a form from a pile and filled it out. 'Here, write your name and occupation.'

Merope looked over the form. Her reading skills were not sharp, but it was straightforward: name, date of birth, employment, place of residence. With careful strokes of the quill she entered her information. When a drop of ink messed up the line with her date of birth, she bit her tongue in outrage at herself. It did not seem to matter, however; when she handed back the form, Greb placed it in a box that said 'Out' and the parchment disappeared in a shower of gold sparks.

An awkward five minutes passed. Merope wanted to look anywhere but at the goblin. She was sure it made her seem untrustworthy but the creature was rather daunting to her. Instead she glanced at the other wizards in the room, concentrating most on the Japanese group. They were arguing with their goblin, making wild gestures, speaking in their language. Once in awhile Merope caught English words like 'corporation,' 'empire,' and 'deductions.'

There was a soft popping noise. Greb grunted. 'The key to your vault,' he said, handing her a large skeleton key. It had a few

unfamiliar symbols etched into it, along with the numbers 653. The weight of it filled Merope's hand.

'This way, this way,' said Greb, already moving out of the room. 'Don't forget your gold.'

Merope hadn't.

Vault 653 was accessed by taking a ride on a little cart at dizzying speed through tunnels, on rickety bridges that crossed roaring waterfalls, and finally past a pair of guard-trolls that waved their clubs menacingly. Merope stopped worrying about her money being safe and started to worry about her person. With Greb in the cart, however, there was no problem.

The cart screeched to a halt and Merope looked up to see the matching numbers 653 on the lintel above a door hewn of solid iron. She clambered out of the cart, tripping on the rails, but caught herself before falling. Clumsy, she thought to herself. The key turned in the lock, just as it should, and the door swung open to reveal a rough stone room, empty of everything save a puddle in the corner. It was, in fact, depressingly empty.

Merope placed her small bag of galleons in the middle. She looked down at the sad pile of gold. Behind her, Greb made a scoffing noise. She, Merope Gaunt Riddle, was not the sort of customer they went out of their way for. Sighing, Merope left the vault, turned the key, and pocketed it. It would not always be so. Someday, somehow, things would be better.

When she stepped out into sunshine, Merope looked down at her own shoes. They were black and scuffed. But they were not the wooden clogs given to her by the Muggles at Stockwell Orphanage; she was not starving; she was not weak; she was not a Squib. For a small shining moment, out from under the gaze of judgmental goblins, Merope allowed herself a surge of pride. She had a Gringotts vault, her very own. It was better than her father had ever done for her.

Things came in threes. It was a fact Merope should have remembered because of the two things that had already happened: little Tom showing his first sign of magic (and what a sign it had been), followed by her opening her first bank account. But in the

middle of eventful August days, the sun shines too hard to think in patterns.

The steps of Gringotts Wizarding Bank were swarming with reporters. Cameras went off, flashes competing with the sunshine, and there was a great deal of shouting and gesturing. At the centre of the circus were three blond heads; that was all Merope could see. She leaned up against a column, trying to stay out of the way.

'Mr. Malfoy! Mr. Malfoy! Can you comment on your acquisition of Manticore Industries?'

'Is there a chance of a run for Minister of Magic, sir?'

'Do you have anything to say about the corruption scandal at the Department of International Magical Cooperation?'

There was a push and a shove and the crowd gave a great heave. Several watch-wizards, identifiable by their bulky frames and brandished wands, moved the reporters out of the way. Through the gap the three golden wizards walked. It was as though the stars and moon moved for them.

Merope gaped openly at the trio. There were two men and a woman. The woman was stunningly beautiful, dressed in the latest Parisian style of robes, with her long golden hair looped up into fashionable plaits. The man to her left was young, tall, fair as the dawn, and strikingly handsome, although his long nose spoke of arrogance. The other man was not so handsome as his companions, nor so young, although he was equally fair-haired and light-eyed. He had a pointed face, thin lips, and pale skin.

'Those are the Malfoys,' she heard a witch behind her whisper to another. 'Casper and Abraxas, and their sister Roxanne.'

'I know! They're the richest wizarding family in Britain,' the witch whispered back.

Observing them as they walked into the bank, Merope felt something familiar stir within her: envy. These three were beautiful, confident, wealthy. They were not unlike another family she'd insinuated herself into. With sudden, vitriolic force, Merope wished that she were such a witch as that Roxanne Malfoy. In flashes of

imagination beyond space and time, she saw herself with a fine-boned face, with golden hair, with the best dress robes, living in a mansion. Tom was sitting near her feet, well-fed and happy, never needing to wear ragged hand-me-down clothes from the charity shop. Everything was perfect. She was not plain, ugly, untalented Merope Gaunt, no, she was Roxanne, she was Cecilia, she was everything she knew she was not.

Fate was a cruel thing, to give Merope the twin triumphs of a highly magical son and her own bank account, and then to present her with such a vision of what she still lacked. An unfair juxtaposition. It took an effort to reach into her memory of the day and reclaim her power over herself. She was proud. She was a descendant of Salazar Slytherin. She had a son, Tom Riddle, who would grow to be a great wizard.

As though her thoughts surrounded her aura, the Malfoy on the left of the party turned his head. He was the less handsome one, although not objectionable by anyone's standards. His grey eyes met Merope's slightly off-kilter blue eyes. She gasped and looked down.

It was not the largest incident of the three that took place that day. But it was something to Merope, who had finally been seen by a complete stranger.

## Chapter Four

Tom's nose was pressed up against the glass of Magical Menagerie. Beyond the window was a display of snakes; according to the sign they were fresh arrived from abroad. There was a bright red and yellow kingsnake; a milky white cornsnake; and a deep blackish-blue baby cobra. Tom loved them all.

He was nine years old. Diagon Alley was his backyard; his mother had started letting him roam freely last year. It was far less embarrassing than having her tote him around everywhere, holding his hand. Tom liked to be independent. And this way, he could buy his mother a birthday gift without her being the wiser. He thought about getting her a snake as a pet, but decided it was more something he would like. Besides, he had only ten Sickles in his pocket. It would not buy very much.

A birthday present, Tom thought, should be something a person would not buy for themselves. He moved on from Magical Menagerie and his gaze rested on Honeydukes, the small London branch. Mummy loved sugar quills. That would be a fine gift.

'Hey, you!' A voice interrupted Tom's thoughts. It was the voice of a boy.

Tom turned. He saw three boys of about his age standing in the street. One had his arms crossed over his chest; all three were larger than he was, and all three looked mean.

'Do I know you?' Tom asked.

'Naw, we wouldn't run with the likes of you,' said the middle boy. 'Would we, lads?'

The other two shook their heads.

Glancing around, Tom saw there were no adults paying attention to them. These boys must not have mothers. 'What do you want?' he asked, caution in his voice.

'We know you've got money,' said the ringleader. 'No one runs around Diagon Alley without it.'

'What's your name?' Tom took a step closer to the three boys, his eyes narrowed. He wanted their names. For some reason he felt it would give him more control over the situation.

'What's it to you?'

'I'm curious,' Tom said lightly.

'M'name's Scottie Mulciber,' said the boy. 'These two are my friends. And you oughtta be scared, because we want your money.'

'I don't have any money,' said Tom, turning out his pockets. He kept his cash in a pouch hung round his neck because his mother warned him of pickpockets in London.

'He's lyin',' said Mulciber. 'What's your name, kid?'

'Tom Riddle.'

'Riddle?' Mulciber snorted. 'What kind of mudblood name is that? You a mudblood, Tommy?'

A burning feeling twisted inside Tom's gut. He had never heard the word 'mudblood' before but he could tell it was a very nasty name indeed. The anger churned and clawed at him, wanting to get out, wanting to make the bully eat his own words. 'Shut up,' he said.

Mulciber and his friends laughed. 'Shut up, he says! We'll teach you to shut up.' With a hand too large for a boy his age, Mulciber lunged forward, grabbing for Tom.

Tom ducked out of his grasp and darted a few feet away, fists clenched. How he wished he could do magic! There were no adults around to help him, either; Diagon Alley was not crowded on a cool, cloudy Tuesday morning in March. Tom regretted that, too, because he could disappear into a crowd like a professional. 'Don't do that again,' he warned Mulciber.

Laughter.

Turning on his heel, Tom ran for it. He could hear the boys' shouts behind him, could hear their feet pounding the cobblestones after him. He veered into Knockturn Alley, a place he knew well. The day

got darker as the walls closed in above his head. A peculiar smell of the forbidden filled his nostrils. His long legs took him far, but he ran into bad luck about a hundred metres down. There was a large rearing hippogriff in the alley, restrained by several wizards, who were trying to get the animal into Griogair's Trade Shop, an establishment that specialized in trading rare magical beasts.

Tom swore under his breath and turned around, backtracking to find another avenue of escape. But Mulciber and his two friends had just caught up.

Panting heavily, Tom looked around for something to help him, but Knockturn Alley was bare of anything valuable. Its denizens took anything that wasn't red-hot or nailed down. A drunken witch leered from a niche in the wall, laughing through a toothless mouth.

'I told you, I have no money,' Tom said in a commanding voice. 'You're wasting your time.'

'Let's see about that,' said Mulciber.

'Let's not,' said Tom. His instincts were in full-alarm mode. The fear was accompanied by another feeling, new and intoxicating: the desire to dominate the situation. He felt as if he believed it enough, the whole world would tilt on its axis for him, or that physical reality would mould itself around his will. He glared at Mulciber. Without quite knowing why he did it, Tom raised his hand, pointing at the other boy.

'Hurt,' he whispered. 'Hurt. Bleed. Leave me alone.'

'What'd you say, mudblood?' Mulciber snorted.

'I said, leave me alone!' Tom said forcefully. 'Do you hear? LEAVE ME ALONE!'

There was a grinding, grainy sort of noise from above them. All four sets of eyes looked up. Mulciber screamed and put his arms over his head; it probably saved his life that he did, for although it might have been coincidence, Tom felt a savage glee as a loose brick from the building above them collapsed, fell, and hit Mulciber square. A dark patch of oozing, wounded blood appeared on Mulciber's bare arm.

Tom stepped up close to Mulciber to press his advantage. 'Do what I say, Mulciber. When I tell you to leave me alone, you leave me alone. Got that?'

The whimpering Mulciber nodded, his eyes darting to find his friends, and then he backed away. 'You're a little weirdo,' was his parting shot to Tom. The three bullies took off running back toward the safety of Diagon Alley.

Smirking, Tom turned around, and ran smack into a tall figure in dark robes. A pale hand reached down and grabbed his shoulder.

'Hey!' Tom said, squirming, still in battle mode. 'Leggo me!'

'What's your name, boy?'

'None of your beeswax,' said Tom.

The figure bent down to Tom's level. It was a wizard with cold pale eyes, blond hair, and white skin. Tom noticed the fine silver clasp on the wizard's cloak and the masculine diamond ring on his right hand. Already suffering from the effects of anger and fear, Tom felt a stab of envy at the man's wealth. Surely a rich man would not try to rob him?

'I'm not going to hurt you,' said the wizard. His accent was odd, foreign. 'I just saw that little demonstration of yours. How old are you?'

'Twelve,' Tom lied.

'You don't look twelve.'

'Yeah, well, why do you care?'

'You're not in trouble,' the blond man said. 'I'm just wondering. That was an interesting defence. I don't think those three boys will trouble you again, if that's what they were doing.'

Tom could not help the smile that tugged at his lips. 'No, they won't bother me again.'

The wizard nodded. 'My name is Casper Malfoy,' he said, extending a hand.

Knowing his manners, Tom shook the proffered hand. 'Tom Riddle,' he said. He expected Malfoy to comment on the name, as Mulciber had, but no remark was made.

'Are your parents here?' Malfoy asked.

'No,' said Tom. 'I run around on my own.'

'I see... do you have parents?'

'I have a mum. She works at the apothecary.' Tom was reluctant to say more.

'You'd better run on back, then. Knockturn Alley is no place for nine-year-olds,' said Malfoy.

Tom stared. 'How'd you know I was nine?'

The left side of Malfoy's lip turned up in a smirk. 'Lucky guess. Come, I'll see you back.' With a turn and a swirl of dark robes, the pale wizard had Tom by the shoulder and guided him back toward Diagon Alley.

Tom attempted to shrug off the grasp, perfectly capable of finding his way back himself, but Malfoy just let out a small huff of laughter.

'Excuse me,' Tom said, gritting his teeth as they emerged out onto Diagon Alley, 'but I have business.'

'Do you?'

'It's my mum's birthday tomorrow,' Tom said. He did not want to give the wizard any more information than necessary, but if he was on a valid errand, he might be left alone. Hurting Mulciber, a boy his own age, was easy, but Tom knew there was nothing he could do with a wizard who had a wand and an education and a great deal of money.

'Is it! Well, what are you going to get her, then?'

'Something from Honeydukes,' said Tom, pointing.

'A good choice,' said Malfoy. 'In fact, I wanted to pick up some toffee fudge myself. May I come with you?'

Unwanted company was one thing. Asking permission was another. 'I 'spose,' Tom shrugged.

They entered Honeydukes. The clerk behind the counter fawned all over herself at the sight of them. It was not lost on Tom, the looks that Malfoy got, the respect, the fear. Malfoy was rich and powerful. Tom wanted desperately for people to look at him that way, as though with a word he could change their stupid little lives.

He darted away to find the jar of sugar quills, plucked out a handful of them, and stepped up to the counter to pay. He made sure that he had not grabbed too many to fit his narrow budget of ten Sickles. When the clerk told him the price, Tom was happy that it was only nine Sickles; it made it seem like he had an excess of money. Carelessly he threw down the coins and looked at Malfoy.

'That didn't take you long,' said Malfoy. The wizard did not buy any toffee fudge.

They were out on Diagon Alley again. Tom was tall for his age, but as he peered up at Malfoy, he felt like a tiny boy. Malfoy was very tall, and carried himself with that foreign air, as though he had travelled and seen more than Tom could even imagine. Another point of envy. Knowledge gained from picture books was not the same as seeing things for oneself.

'You didn't want any toffee fudge,' Tom accused Malfoy.

Malfoy shrugged. 'Changed my mind.'

'You know what I think? I think you're following me. What're you doing, following a kid, anyway?'

'You're a bright little boy, aren't you?'

Tom said nothing. He noticed that a group of witches sprang out of the way as Malfoy passed; another wizard shrank back and looked like he wanted to bow. For a nice moment, Tom could pretend it was

because of him, that he was the special one, and he ignored the tall wizard walking alongside him.

'Listen,' said Malfoy, kneeling down to look him in the eye. 'What you did back there in Knockturn Alley was unusual. You know that, don't you?'

'How is it unusual?' Tom asked.

'Well, that was a close thing to a wandless curse.'

Tom stepped back. He was in trouble. Perfect. Would Casper Malfoy take him to the authorities? Was that why Malfoy was dogging his footsteps? Tom gulped a little, but tried to control his reaction. Who would take care of his mother if he was sent to Azkaban for a wandless curse?

'Relax,' said Malfoy. 'I told you, you are not in trouble. I'm just curious who you are, that is all.'

'Right, sure,' Tom said disbelievingly.

'How can I prove it to you?' Malfoy asked, spreading his hands in innocence. 'Is there something you want? How about a familiar? A wizard needs a familiar, you know. What's your favourite animal?'

'Snake,' blurted Tom. His mind shuffled back to those nice snakes he'd seen in the window of Magical Menagerie.

'Indeed,' murmured Malfoy. 'Come on, then.' He set off in the direction of the shop. 'Tell me, Tom Riddle, don't you have any friends your own age?'

'I don't need friends,' said Tom. 'I have my mum, and Mr. Jigger, and all the other shopkeepers on Diagon Alley.'

'Hmm,' said Malfoy. 'Still, a boy should have friends his own age. That way, you would not be snuck upon or chased, like those boys. Safety in numbers, they say.'

'I don't need friends,' Tom repeated stubbornly. The truth was he'd never considered having friends. He was different from other people,

understood them too well, and hence despised them. His mother always told him he was old for his age.

'All right,' said Malfoy mildly. 'Here we are,' he said as they stopped outside Magical Menagerie.

'Why are you doing this?' Tom asked, suddenly suspicious. In his experience, people only gave gifts when they wanted something in exchange. Even his mother was guilty of it; sometimes she gave him treats in order to make him do his chores, or compel him to be quiet. 'Be honest with me,' he warned Malfoy, just as his mother sometimes warned him.

Malfoy looked down at him as though debating whether to tell him something. 'All right,' he said. 'Frankly, I've never heard of a child your age able to control his magic like that. It impressed me. And my family... we like to be friends with powerful people. My brother and sister would laugh at me, befriending a nine-year-old, but I'm older and wiser than they are. I see some talent.'

The flattery worked on Tom, even though he resisted the impulse to grin.

'So,' said Malfoy, 'let me cement our friendship by helping you acquire a familiar.'

'My mum said not to take money from strangers,' Tom said. He only just remembered her advice and wished he hadn't, for he dearly wanted one of those snakes in the window.

'I'm not giving you money. It's for the animal, actually. I'm just helping one of those little snakes —' he gestured at the row of cages '—find a new home.'

When it was put like that, Tom could hardly argue. His attention returned to the three snakes in the window. 'Can I go in and hold them?'

'I would recommend it,' said Malfoy lightly.

Once inside Magical Menagerie, Tom had to deal with the incessant barking of dogs, the meowing of cats (he did not like cats at all) and the squeaking of rats. He wished the animals would be quiet. And

just as he had the wish for silence, he thought the din in the shop went down just a fraction. He wondered if Malfoy noticed it.

Tom approached the glass cages containing the snakes. He put his hands on the edge and leaned over to observe them. The kingsnake was depressed, he could tell. The cornsnake was older than it looked. The cobra was simply hungry. He did not know how he knew all of this, but figured it came from an intuitive imagination. Reaching his hand into the cage, he picked up the cobra snake. It wriggled and tried to get away from him. 'Shhh,' he whispered. 'It's all right. I won't hurt you. I'm your friend.'

To Tom's vast astonishment, the snake tensed up, turned its head to look at him, and then its tongue came out in a hiss... but Tom could understand what it was saying. 'What'sss your name?' said a sibilant female voice.

'Tom Riddle,' he replied. How extraordinary, a snake that could speak English! Tom decided that this would be his familiar. It must be a magical snake, specially bred or something. He had never heard of talking snakes, but he still had much to learn about the world. There were surprises at every turn. Tom grinned and stroked the head of the tiny cobra. He straightened up and, holding the creature carefully in his hands, turned to Malfoy.

Casper Malfoy was staring at him, pale eyes wide and intense. His thin mouth was taut. 'You're a...?'

'I'm a what?' Tom asked, suddenly alarmed.

'A Parselmouth,' Malfoy murmured. 'Incredible.'

'What's a Parselmouth?' Tom asked.

'Someone who can speak to snakes,' Malfoy said quickly. 'You spoke Parseltongue. Snake language.'

'I did?' Tom asked. 'I thought I was speaking English!'

'You didn't know?'

'No!' Tom said indignantly.

'It sounded like hissing to my ears. I can't speak it, you see.'

'Ohh...' Tom glanced down at the snake in his hands. He decided to try again. 'Am I speaking snake language?' he asked the snake.

'Of coursse,' replied the snake.

'Yow!' Tom exclaimed in English.

Malfoy appeared worried rather than impressed. 'If I were you, Tom, I wouldn't tell anyone you're a Parselmouth.' He glanced around as though afraid of being overheard. 'Come. Is that the one you want?'

Tom nodded. It took only a few minutes for Malfoy to hand over three Galleons to the shopkeeper; he was terse and silent the whole way. Once outside, Malfoy handed the wire cage containing the snake to Tom. 'What will you name it?' Malfoy asked.

'I don't know,' said Tom.

'How about 'Nagini'? It's the name of a serpent queen, from India, like that cobra there.'

Tom turned the name over in his head a few times. He liked it. 'Do you want to be called Nagini?' he asked the snake.

The snake bobbed her head a few times. Tom took it to mean acquiescence.

'Yah,' he said. 'Nagini is good.'

'Good,' said Malfoy. 'I'll have an eye on you, Tom Riddle.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Tom. He knew that he owed Malfoy thanks, at the very least.

Then, just as abruptly as Casper Malfoy had appeared in Tom's afternoon, he turned on his heel and disappeared again, around a corner and gone.

'The potion must be stirred three times deosil for every turn widdershins, then one sprig of peppermint added at each widdershins turn, for twelve rounds, approximately five minutes, until the potion turns a pale pink...' Merope's finger ran along the

textbook as she murmured the words aloud. She was curled up on the small sofa at home. A merry fire roared beside her. Thin as ever, her legs were tucked up beneath her, and her hair was slung up into a bun.

Tom was off in Diagon Alley. It had been a difficult decision for Merope to allow him to roam free, but he went stir-crazy when kept at home too long, and started to drive her crazy too. Before she gave him explicit permission, Merope knew that Tom had snuck out without telling her, which worried her... but she thought it better to expand her rules to fit his behaviour. The child had a mind of his own.

As Merope transcribed notes out of the battered copy of 'Magical Drafts and Potions,' she smiled at the thought of Tom. There had been several more incidents of accidental magic over the years and she could tell he would be a powerful wizard. He had a focus that she could not imagine for a boy so young. Tom's magic helped Merope feel better about her life decisions, and it motivated her to learn more herself, for the child had endless questions. Merope knew the answers to about half of them.

Mr. Jigger had given her a copy of some potions textbooks, including her current project, which was authored by Jigger's grandfather Arsenius. In addition to knowing how to brew the basic medical potions sold at the apothecary, Merope was learning advanced things such as Veritaserum, Polyjuice Potion, and Draught of Peace. She could already brew Amortentia, of course, although the memory of it was forced back. Some skills could be painful.

Inside the fire, a log made a popping noise. Merope sighed. It looked like rain outside; she wished Tom would get home. He looked more like his father every day. And every day, Merope gave thanks that he looked nothing like her. Her life was through Tom now.

The musical floorboards of the old stairs creaked as someone pounded up. Merope smiled again. She had made a batch of fresh cookies; her cooking charms were improving.

'Tom!' she said, standing up as her son came in the door. 'Come here.' She gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek. He made a face at her.

Merope laughed. 'I made you some cookies. Are you hungry?'

'Yes.' Tom disappeared behind the screen that separated his little bedroom area. Merope put it up three years ago; she thought boys should have a place of their own, for their toys and books and jars of dead things.

'Was Diagon Alley nice today?' she called to him as she arranged the cookies on a plate.

There was a moment of silence. 'Yes,' he said.

Merope frowned. Was he hiding something? Or was he waiting for her to pry the true story out of him? 'It doesn't sound like it,' she said.

Tom reappeared from behind the screen. He shrugged. 'Ran into some blokes who tried to take my money,' he said.

Merope gasped. If someone had hurt her boy... a clench of worry pressed at her heart. 'What happened, Tom?' she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

'I took care of them,' he said. 'Don't worry, Mum.'

'Well, for Merlin's sake! Who were these 'blokes'?'

'There was one called Mulciber. I think he was my age, but looked older.' Tom's face closed up.

Merope knew it was all she would get out of him. 'Be careful,' she said unnecessarily.

Tom just shrugged again and grabbed a cookie.

With a sigh, Merope took a cookie too, and chewed it with a worried expression. She felt her son's eyes on her and it made her slightly uncomfortable; there was a charge in the air as though something was left still unsaid. Her maternal intuition was correct.

'Mum?'

'Yes?'

'What's a mudblood?'

Merope's muscles froze. Where had he heard that word? She regretted her decision to let him wander Diagon Alley if it meant that he heard foul language. As though reaching her from beyond the years, Merope could hear her father's voice, hissing insults, deriding Muggle-born wizards as the filth of the earth.

'Where did you hear that word?' she asked slowly, carefully.

'Those boys – the bullies – called me one,' said Tom. 'They said my name was a mudblood name.'

'Don't! – say it,' Merope cried. 'It's a very bad word. And you're not one, anyway, so they were wrong.'

'But, Mum, what does it mean?' Tom glared at her, compelling her to answer his question. His cookie lay on its napkin, half-eaten and forgotten.

'A mudblood is a very bad name for a wizard, or a witch, who is Muggle-born,' said Merope. 'Someone who has non-magical parents.'

'Oh,' said Tom. 'But that's not me, right?'

'That's not you,' Merope agreed, praying that he was done asking questions.

He wasn't.

'But how come they said my name was a mudblood name?'

'I told you, Tom, don't say that word! It's not something that a nine-year-old should hear, let alone say.'

'Mum.' Tom cocked his head at her insistently.

Merope's gaze trailed along the floorboards to rest on the rug. Tom's eyes were too bright, too intense, too questing for her to bear. She knew that someday he would start asking about his name and origins... but there was too much to tell, and it felt late, as though

she were past the point of truth. She had been living her own lies for so long that it was a habit. Uncomfortable, and still sad, Merope decided to tell him part of the truth.

'They meant our surname. Riddle. That's because your father, for whom you were named, was a Muggle.'

Tom's eyes widened. 'He wasn't a wizard?'

'That's right, he wasn't a wizard,' Merope said.

'But... but... what happened to him? Where is he? How did you meet him?' The earnest curiosity in Tom's voice was heartbreakingly hopeful.

'His name was Thomas Riddle,' Merope said, and her voice wavered. 'He was a... neighbour... in a village up north. From a Muggle family, but they were aristocrats, very wealthy people. When... when we got married, his family did not approve of me, and my father did not approve of him because he was a Muggle.'

Tom's brow was furrowed. 'Is that why you came to London?'

'Yes,' said Merope, and in her head, in her path, she reached a crossroads. She knew what question was coming next and it bore down on her.

'What happened to him? Why isn't he here with us?'

There was a silence filled with the ticking of the wall-clock, the vague muffled sounds of the street outside, the breath and heartbeats of mother and son. Merope was desperate. She wanted her lie to be true, wanted it and half-believed it, so that when the words came out of her mouth they sounded convincingly upset. 'He died, Tom. Your father is dead to us.'

His jaw dropped a little. A cloud of disappointment swam through his dark eyes. 'He died?'

'Yes, he died. Now finish up your cookie, and I need you to clean the windows. They're looking grimy.' Merope felt a trickle down her cheek and wiped away the tears that had crept up on her.

Perhaps wisely, Tom just nodded. His face looked paler than usual but he did his chores without asking any more difficult questions. He cleaned the windows as instructed. Then he disappeared behind his screen and Merope saw the glow of the lamp; he must be reading.

For her part Merope tried to go back to her potions book but found it difficult to concentrate. She kept imagining her ex-husband: what he was doing, what he had told his parents when he returned to Little Hangleton, whether he was married to someone else by now. And because her flight from Little Hangleton was associated with other people, she thought about her father and brother. How hard she had tried to banish them from her thoughts. She'd never told Tom about her side of the family, and certainly nothing about their famous ancestor. It was not the sort of burden a little boy should carry. Besides, it did not matter. Their ancestry from Slytherin meant nothing for Tom...

There was a yelp from behind the screen. 'Hey!' she heard Tom shout. The sound of feet hitting the floor in a scramble. A sliding noise. Then, Merope saw a tiny snake slither out across the floor in a mad dash.

'Come back,' Tom hissed at the creature.

Merope gasped. That. She should have thought of it.

Tom caught up with the snake and swept it up into his hands, whispering something calming to it. As though there were lead weights behind his eyes, he looked up slowly and guiltily at Merope.

'Tom,' she said. 'Where did you get that snake?'

Another guilty flush. 'Magical Menagerie,' he said.

'Did you speak to the snakes inside the store? Did anyone hear you?'

'You heard that? I'm a Parselmouth,' he announced, setting his shoulders a little straighter, not answering the question.

'Did anyone hear you?' she repeated.

'Mum, you're asking weird questions,' Tom accused her. 'I can talk to snakes, and all you're worried about is whether anyone heard me!'

Merope sighed. It was a day of revelations that she was unprepared for. Slumping over in her rocking chair, defeated, she gestured for Tom to sit by her. 'Bring the snake,' she said.

He sank down onto the sofa, holding the snake gingerly. Merope reached out and took the creature from his hands. She cleared her throat. 'What is your name, little snake?' she hissed in Parseltongue. From her lips it sounded soft, unassuming.

'He named me Nagini,' the snake told her.

Tom stared at her. 'You can do it, too?'

'Yes, I can.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Tom's mood seemed to be swinging between anger and elation. The interplay of emotions was strange on his face.

'It... gives me bad memories,' she said. 'All my family can speak it, you see. It's inherited. I'm a Parselmouth, so you're a Parselmouth. I wasn't sure if you would be, since your father's a Muggle, but... you are.'

'You make it sound like it's a bad thing,' Tom scowled.

'It's not a bad thing, Tom, but Parseltongue... the ability to speak to snakes is not very common. It's associated with the Dark Arts, with Dark wizards.'

'Were your family Dark wizards?' Tom asked, fascination growing on his face. There was an eagerness there that Merope was not sure she liked; whether it was from curiosity about the family or curiosity about the Dark Arts, she could not tell.

'Not exactly,' Merope lied. 'But they were not nice people. When I hear Parseltongue... I can't help but remember it as coming from them. I'm sorry, Tom, I should have told you sooner.'

'I don't have to talk to Nagini,' Tom offered. 'I'll be like a normal person with her.'

Merope smiled. 'No, you can talk to her. She's your familiar and she needs you. I don't mind.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure. But Tom, tell me again, did anyone hear you speaking Parseltongue? Any bystanders?'

He got a shifty look. 'Just some bloke who was there. He seemed impressed, not scared. Is it because of the Dark Arts that you don't want me speaking it? Because of what other people will think?'

'It's safer that way,' said Merope, glad at how quickly Tom caught on to things. 'If you really trust someone, maybe you can tell them. But otherwise, try to stay quiet when you talk to Nagini or any other snake.'

'Yes, Mum,' Tom said. A vague look of affirmation crossed his face, as though the advice confirmed something he already knew.

She handed Nagini back to Tom and he smiled at the little serpent. At the sight of Tom's clear pride, an uncomfortable suggestion insinuated itself into Merope's head... How did Tom pay for the snake? Did he coerce it out of its cage somehow, which was tantamount to stealing? Even in the darkest days of poverty, Merope had never stolen anything. Her dignity would not allow it.

'It's tea-time,' she said, nodding at the clock, where the hour hand was at '4'. She stood up and walked over to the kitchen, pointed her wand at the stove-top to light the fire, and levitated the teakettle above the flame. 'Tell me more about Nagini.'

'She's a cobra,' said Tom. 'From India.'

'From India! That's exciting. And how did you choose her?'

'The other snakes weren't right. One was old and the other was depressed. This one was just hungry.'

'Mmm...' Merope's back was turned to him as she prepared the tea. 'And how much is the shop charging these days?'

Silence from behind her. Merope's eyelids dropped closed for a moment. Surely not... surely she had taught him better than that. She was a shopkeeper's assistant! Tom knew how thieves were despised, how stealing was wrong. A horrible theory bloomed in her head that Tom had inherited more of the Gaunts than it appeared. Was he a born criminal?

Turning around, she gave him the sternest look she could muster.

Tom returned her gaze. He was calm, too calm. 'You think I stole her,' he said.

'I didn't say that –'

'You didn't need to say it. I can tell. How can you think that, Mum?'

'Well, Tom...' she dropped her hands and shrugged her shoulders in helplessness, 'where did you get the money to pay for it, then?'

'I didn't pay for it.'

'Then –'

'Let me finish!' Tom said. 'You accuse me of stealing and won't listen to me.'

'I didn't accuse –'

'Someone else paid for it, right? A friend. I made a friend, and he bought it for me, because he said I needed a familiar.'

Merope blinked. She had not expected that. 'A friend? A wizard?'

'No, a Muggle who came in off the street,' Tom said sarcastically. 'Of course a wizard.'

'Who is he, then?'

Tom hesitated. 'He's a friend, that's all. He's an all right chap. He's the one who heard me talk to the snakes.'

'His name?' Merope pressed, unable to suppress her insatiable maternal curiosity about her son's life. 'Who is he?'

'It doesn't matter,' said Tom defiantly. 'He's my friend, not yours, and Nagini's tired.' He stood up and ran to his side of the room, disappearing once more behind the screen. Although she could speak to him, although he could hear the teakettle sing that it was ready, the psychological barrier was up. Tom was out of reach for the time being. And, Merope thought, perhaps it was a good thing. It had been a long day for both of them. Too much said, too much realised, too many secrets in the open and still left untold.

She sipped her tea as quietly as she could, and thought she could detect a tiny sniffle from behind the screen. Whether he cried about his 'dead' father, about the taunts of the other boys, or about the suspicion of theft, she never knew.

## Chapter Five

Merope was anxious. She was usually anxious at night, afraid of shadows and small noises, the quiet watches when the memories of her father and brother seemed closer and more vivid. She had nothing to drown out their voices. Squib. Worthless. Muggle-lover. Ugly. A disgrace to Slytherin.

A small scoffing noise came from her throat. She'd never had the chance to be a disgrace to Slytherin, because she'd never had the chance to attend Hogwarts. Her father had refused on the grounds that there were 'mudbloods' there. For that reason, none of Slytherin's line had attended the school since the founding wizard himself had left. None, thought Merope, until my Tom.

It was the reason she was worried and insomniac. Tom's Hogwarts letter had not arrived yet. It was late August of 1938. Tom was eleven, and he was a wizard, and he had not received a letter. Could it be that the school had stopped bothering with the Gaunt family? She could not remember whether she had received a letter of invitation to study. Thirty years old now, Merope's days as a child were hazy and dark, punctuated only by those few particular incidents that left her awake and shaking in the night. For the life of her she could not recall receiving a Hogwarts letter. Of course, her father Marvolo would have hidden it, would have thrown it away with an exclamation of disgust. Muggle-lovers might have touched the letter, Merlin forbid.

Merope frowned. From the other side of the flat, from behind the opaque screen, she could hear Tom's steady, calm breathing of deep sleep. He would do well at Hogwarts. Tom was strong. He was a survivor. However, he had virtually no friends his own age, another thing that worried Merope. She knew he needed playmates, but she was so busy working in the store, and keeping him caught up on his reading and writing, that she left the rest up to Tom. And Tom showed no inclination of friendliness.

He knew Jigger's children, of course, but they were older than he. The youngest Jigger was fourteen now, and a girl, and considered herself above playing with children too young to attend Hogwarts. Tom was better friends with that snake of his, Nagini. The snake liked Merope, but Merope did not like it very much. In fact, she did

not care for snakes at all, despite being able to communicate with them.

Her frown grew deeper. She hoped he would find some friends at Hogwarts. She hoped his letter arrived soon. The white bedsheets twisted in her nervous hands; she jumped when the wind rattled the shingles of the roof. 'Go to sleep,' she muttered to herself. Four hours later, she accomplished the task.

The next morning, there was an owl tapping on the window, but to Merope's disappointment it was only the subscription owl, bringing her morning copy of the Daily Prophet. She opened it half-heartedly, scanning the headlines. Nothing worth writing about, in her opinion: a vague financial scandal, the news that Brazil would host next year's Quidditch World Cup, a speech by the Minister of Magic.

'Can I read the paper, Mum?' Tom asked. He was eating a plate of sausage and toast and beans; the child ate more every day. He was like a food monster and Merope had trouble keeping up with the groceries required for a growing boy. She made a face as Tom gave a piece of sausage to Nagini the snake, who had so far grown to a rather large five feet and ate just about anything.

'In a minute,' she replied. Merope always scanned the paper first before handing it over to curious Tom. Her eye caught on an editorial about house-elf rights, but two sentences in she abandoned it. Then, when she saw the top right corner of the 'international news' section, Merope's heart skipped a little beat. There was that wizard, Casper Malfoy, according to the caption. He was the elder and far less handsome of the Malfoy family, but he had been the one to see Merope that day, seven years ago, outside of Gringotts Bank. She had not seen him since.

Sometimes, it seemed that Merope did nothing but live vicariously through the past.

According to the small blurb of an article, Casper Malfoy was back in London after a long residence in France. It also referred to the upcoming wedding of 'brother Abraxas Malfoy, aged 30, to witch Veridian More, 19.'

'Here, you can read the paper,' Merope said, handing it over to Tom. She no longer wished to read about people out of her reach. It was too depressing to compare herself to them.

Later that morning, Merope was chopping valerian root with expertise and dropping it into small satchels to be sold. Pre-chopped, pre-designated quantities of herbs were her idea. She knew from experience that much of potions-making was taken up by chopping and dicing. The pre-chopped ingredients were a steady income for the apothecary, as there were quite a few lazy witches and wizards out there.

Behind the counter, out of sight of the main shop, Tom sat on the floor, using Merope's wand to stir a cauldron of boil-cure potion. It was a violation of the Ministry's laws about underage magic, of course, but Merope did not think it did any harm. Sometimes she allowed Tom to stir simple potions according to the instructions; this one was first-year level. And it kept the boy occupied... on one slow afternoon a few weeks ago, Merope had found Tom scaling the roof, walking the ridgepoles from building to building along Diagon Alley, and a frantic witch from below had called the Ministry, thinking Tom was going to commit suicide.

He had been relegated to labelling slug parts for a week afterward as punishment.

'Mum, could a Muggle make a potion? If they had the right ingredients and instructions?'

'No...' Merope said slowly. 'No, potions require a magical fire, and a wand to stir them. It's the intention that makes it work, you see.'

'So if my intention was to cause boils, rather than cure them, is that what this potion would do?'

Merope laughed. 'Why would you want to cause boils?'

'It's just a theory,' said Tom.

'No, it wouldn't cause boils. It's a combination of things. The ingredients, the magic of the wizard, and the intention, of course. If you wanted to cause boils, that potion wouldn't do it... although it might not work very well against boils.'

'Oh,' said Tom.

'Don't sound so disappointed,' said Merope. 'I'm sure you'll learn plenty of hexes at Hogwarts.'

'Yep,' said Tom cheerfully. 'What house do you think I'll be in, Mum? Gryffindor? Or Hufflepuff, like Mr. Jigger?'

She was quiet for moment. There was no doubt which house Tom would be in. And he still did not have his letter. 'I don't know,' she finally said.

As though answering the summons of Merope's worry, Jigger stepped into the shop, speaking in low tones with another man, a small balding wizard who had a rather vapid look. 'Ah, Merope,' said Jigger.

'Hello, sir.' She bent down as though retrieving something. 'Make yourself scarce!' she hissed to Tom. It would not do for him to be seen stirring potions. He darted quick as a cat behind the shelves and out the back door. Merope took her wand and stirred the potion with one hand, keeping most of her attention on her boss. Jigger spoke deferentially to the other man. He gestured at his shop, nodding his head, and Merope could see a smile beneath the large moustache.

'Oh, and Headmaster, this is my shop assistant, Mrs. Riddle. Merope, this is Armando Dippet, the headmaster of Hogwarts School.'

Merope nearly dropped her wand. A pulse of anxiety flooded her veins. The headmaster of Hogwarts! 'H-hello, sir,' she managed to croak out.

'Mrs. Riddle is it?' said Dippet. His voice was squeaky and lacked conviction. 'Good, good... Jigger, I was informed that you had Exploding Fluid in stock. Pre-made. I told Slughorn I would pick some up for him.'

From her place behind the counter, Merope grimaced. She knew Horace Slughorn, the Potions Master at Hogwarts; he tottered into the shop at least twice a year, often with a special order list. He never paid any attention to her. She was not enough of a 'persona' to warrant Slughorn's interest. As a result, the Potions Master's business was mostly conducted with Jigger.

'—Just in the storeroom,' Jigger was saying. 'Merope, could you fetch it?'

'Fetch what?'

'The Exploding Fluid, girl.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, clattering around as she left the counter. With a dart of her wand, she charmed her knife to continue its job of chopping valerian. Back in the storeroom, she encountered Tom, who was skulking in the shadows with his ear cocked toward the door.

'What are you doing back here, silly goose?' she asked him.

'Eavesdropping,' he said baldly.

'Well, don't get caught. Now where is that Exploding Fluid...?' Her hands brushed along the dusty shelves. 'Ah.' Grasping the small vial, she sent a wink at her son, who winked back.

Merope re-emerged, triumphant at how quick she had been. 'Here it is, sir,' she said, presenting the vial to Dippet.

'Mmm,' he nodded in acknowledgment.

'Mrs. Riddle has an eleven-year-old son,' Jigger said. 'Hoping to get into Hogwarts, he is.'

'He a wizard?' Dippet asked, peering more closely at Merope. 'No Squibs in your family?'

Her mouth twitched in discomfort. 'Well...'

Jigger rescued her. 'Oh, young Tom's a wizard, all right. Showed magic at the age of two, he did! Dumbledore was there to see it.'

Dippet tittered. 'Dumbledore, eh? Well... the boy should be getting his letter, then. They'll be mailed tomorrow morning. We're running a bit behind schedule this year, I'm afraid... all that nasty business in Germany, our staff is called upon by the Ministry, you know...'

Merope could have collapsed in relief. No wonder Tom had not received a letter – they had not been mailed yet. She tuned out as the men began speaking of political developments in the German Ministry, and that new Dark wizard on the rise, Grindelwald. There was too much discussion of blood purity for Merope's taste. Grindelwald's politics reminded her of her father.

Instead she ran back into the storeroom. 'That's the headmaster of Hogwarts out there,' she told Tom. 'He says the letters will be mailed tomorrow.'

A glow of interest flared up in Tom's eyes. 'Do you reckon I'll get one?'

'I certainly hope so,' she said. 'No one in our family has been to school in a long time. I hope they haven't forgotten about us.'

'What if they have forgotten?' Tom sounded worried.

'Then I'll write to Dumbledore,' Merope said decisively, saying the idea aloud as it came to her. She would never dare to write to the professor on her own, but for Tom's sake she would steel her nerve. However, she prayed it would not come to that. 'You remember Dumbledore, don't you?'

Tom shook his head.

'Well, you were pretty young when he last saw you. About three years old, I think... you destroyed a bag of sweets he had.'

He snickered. 'How?'

'It was magic,' Merope said. She ruffled his raven-black hair.

'Hey, Mum!' Tom's hands were on his head, patting his hair into place again. 'Don't muss it up.'

She just laughed at him.

Diagon Alley was packed. It was a warm day, sunny, with light fluffy clouds skittering harmlessly across the sky. Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour was having a special taste-testing; there was a queue three blocks long. The air was filled with shouts, greetings, arguments, laughter. Shoppers dodged and swerved their way through the

crowds with arms laden with packages. There was nothing but peace and prosperity in the faces of all.

All, that is, except that of Merope Gaunt Riddle, who muttered to herself as she read the list of supplies. 'I don't know how we're going to afford all of this... books, robes... Mr. Jigger said you could take that old cauldron and scale set, so that's good...'

'Mum, can I have a new set of quills?' Tom asked.

'No, dear, you'll have to make do with the ones we have.'

'But the feathers on them ones are all falling out.'

'On those ones, Tom. And that's too bad.'

Merope had Tom by the hand, although he kept trying to squirm free of her grasp, insisting that he would not get lost in the crowd. The previous week Merope had a dancing-around-the-room moment when Tom's Hogwarts letter arrived. But her enthusiasm had been squelched when she saw the list of first-year supplies and calculated the cost. She barely had enough savings to cover tuition.

Along with the acceptance letter had come a small slip of parchment, offering the use of Hogwarts' student fund for the 'economically depressed', but Merope refused to consider taking charity. Not yet. Not until she had to.

'I know something to cheer you up,' she said. 'Let's get you a wand, hmm?'

'Yeah!' Tom shouted. 'Ollivander's!'

'That's right, Ollivander's.' Merope was a little bit excited herself. Her own wand had been her mother's, and her mother's before that, and was not quite suited to Merope's magic. She made do. But Tom would have a wand that was perfectly matched to him... Merope was eager to see what it would be like.

They entered the sombre hush of Ollivander's store. There was another boy in the shop, a Hogwarts first-year from the looks of it, along with his mother.

'See, won't your father be proud, same wood as his wand...' the mother was saying.

The boy, a small weedy child, had an ill-favoured look on his face. 'Can't we go to the Quidditch store?'

'I don't know why, Cornelius. First-years aren't allowed to have brooms.'

'But I want to look at them!' Cornelius whined.

Old Mr. Ollivander (it had to be him, although Merope had never met the man) finished wrapping up a long wand-size box. 'Here you are, Mrs. Nott.'

'Thank you,' Mrs. Nott said tersely. She noticed Merope and Tom near the door and gave them a once-over; there was not much approval in her thin face. Merope dropped her gaze.

'Excuse us,' Mrs. Nott said, sweeping past them. Cornelius made a face at Tom, who merely stared back as though surprised at such childish behaviour.

The door clinked behind the pair, leaving the shop in silence but for the ticking of an ancient clock on the wall. Mr. Ollivander murmured things to himself and turned around, straightening the boxes on the shelf behind him, seeming not to notice Merope and Tom.

'Erm... excuse me?' Merope ventured.

'Ye-ees?' Ollivander said in a voice that wavered with age.

'We, uh...'

'We're here to buy a wand,' said Tom.

'Of course you are!' Ollivander said. 'They all are, you know.'

Tom looked puzzled. 'You are a wand shop, sir.'

'Sharp boy,' said Ollivander to Merope. She could not tell if he was being serious or not.

'A wand, sir?' Merope reminded him, emboldened by her son's intense glare.

'Oh, yes, yes. Fine.' Ollivander stepped away from the shelf and took a long look at Tom. 'Let's see your hand, young man. Right-handed, are you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Hmm... yes... let's try this one.' Ollivander disappeared behind a shelf and came back brandishing a wand. 'Ash, this one is, ten inches. Give it a wave.'

Tom took the wand and grasped it in his hand. He waved it once. There was a loud, unpleasant crackling noise, followed by a minor eruption of light out the back end of the wand. 'Geez!' Tom exclaimed, as his hair stood up on end.

Merope covered her mouth with her hand to hide her laughter.

'Next!' Ollivander declared. 'Here.'

The next wand, eleven inches of willow, flooded the shop. After that, the mahogany of ten-and-a-half inches set a pile of parchment on fire. Ollivander muttered to himself. It seemed that Tom was a difficult customer.

'Wait here,' the old man instructed them.

They were left alone in the front of the shop, surrounded with the aftermath of Tom's wand-waving. Merope had a vague nervousness about not being able to find a proper wand for her son. Could that even happen, she wondered?

It was an irrelevant worry. Ollivander came back clutching a dusty old box. 'Try this one,' he said. 'One of a kind.'

Tom reached out for the wand. It was long, about thirteen inches, and of a beautiful pale golden colour. When he took it in his hand, Merope felt a draft of air swirling around her face.

As though afraid of what would happen with the wand, Tom made a slow circular motion in front of him. A glowing green smoke came out of the tip, turning into a mid-air whirlpool, beautiful and sinuous.

Ollivander made a noise of approval.

'I like this one,' said Tom.

'Thirteen inches, yew, core of a phoenix feather,' Ollivander said. 'An extremely powerful wand.'

A look of satisfaction crossed Tom's face. Merope could almost hear his thoughts: 'But of course.'

After that, Tom did not complain about old quills and second-hand books and robes.

The scuffed old trunk loomed open in the middle of the floor. Merope thought it looked like a great wooden beast with bands of steel, eating up all evidence of her son. Into the trunk went robes, books, cauldron, scales, potions ingredients, socks, toothbrush... all the things a new Hogwarts student might need. Most of it was second-hand or very old. Tom held Nagini wrapped around his arm and shoulders; the snake would not be going with him to school. The goodbyes were rather heartbreakingly.

It was the first of September. They had a good hour before they needed to be at King's Cross for Tom to catch the Hogwarts Express. Merope thought she was more nervous than he was; fear knocked at her mind that Tom would have a bad time, that he would get into trouble, that the train might derail, that Hogwarts might be taken over by trolls. There was no end to the scenarios of doom Merope could think up. Imagination was not always a gift.

'You be a good snake,' Tom told Nagini in Parseltongue. There was a slight quaver in his voice, a watery quality to the hissing. 'Look after Mum.'

'I'll miss you, Tom,' Nagini said. 'Why can't I come with you?'

'Why can't she come with me, again, Mum?' Tom asked.

'Because it's not allowed,' Merope answered in Parseltongue for the snake's benefit. 'It's in the rules. I'm sorry, I wish Nagini could go,

too.' And she did. The snake grew larger by the day. Although Nagini was fairly docile for a cobra, Merope knew that Tom was the true apple of the serpent's eye. She was his familiar, after all.

'I've made you a box with cookies, some banana bread, and fudge,' Merope told Tom. 'Don't eat it all at once or you'll get a bellyache.'

'I hope the food there is good,' Tom said.

'I just hope they feed you properly at this school, with enough vegetables,' said Merope. Tom made a face. 'Here.' She tucked the box of cookies in amongst his robes.

The clock on the wall announced that it was half-ten. 'Time to go,' it reminded them.

'I suppose that's it, then...' Merope said, wringing her hands. There was a lump in her throat that refused to go away, a sense of looming loneliness that pressed heavy on her heart. For eleven years Tom had been her reason for living. Now he was going away to school. A sob threatened to burst forth and she swallowed it violently. At least wait until the train's pulling away, she told herself.

On his own, Tom closed the trunk and latched it. His initials, TMR, were painted in black on the side.

'You don't have to go!' Merope cried suddenly.

Tom seemed to sigh. He did not look at her. 'Yes I do,' he said. 'We'll miss the train.'

'Ohhh,' Merope said, throwing her arms around her son.

'Mum, you're smothering me.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, Tommy. I just –'

'Don't call me that,' Tom insisted.

He did not know that she called him Tommy so that she did not think of her former husband. He was, after all, turning to the spitting image of his father, aside from the eyes. Instead of dwelling on

events, Merope snatched up her cloak and Tom's, too. She brought it around his shoulders and fastened it, her fingers fumbling.

'It'll be all right, Mum,' he said, looking her straight in the eye. 'I'll be fine. You'll be fine, too. I'll come home if you want me to.'

Merope smiled. Her Tom was an angel in her eyes. However, she was the adult, and had to act like it. 'I would like you here with me always,' she said. 'But you have to get an education. You can't stay with your old mum forever. You'll have a wonderful time.' She hugged him again. 'Now, say goodbye to Nagini, and let's get you to the train station.'

'Goodbye, Nagini,' Tom hissed.

'You already said goodbye,' the snake retorted, but she slithered over to wrap around Tom's arm one last time, anyway.

They walked Tom's trunk to the Leaky Cauldron and took a Muggle taxi to King's Cross Station. It was only a five-minute ride through the city. Tom kept his eyes straight ahead and neither of them replied to the taxi driver's comments about the odd lightness of Tom's trunk. Jigger had thought to charm it for them so it was not so difficult to move. Merope paid in pounds sterling; she was well-versed in Muggle money, having run out of it all those years ago. Besides, the exchange rate between wizarding money and pounds was quite in her favour and she wanted to save a few Knuts where she could. They disembarked from the taxi and into the pouring rain.

'Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, does it say?' Merope asked Tom, who held the ticket in his hand.

'Yah,' he said.

'I wonder where that is,' she said once they were inside, gazing up at the huge metal rafters and the many platforms where trains waited, hissing and clacking. The station was swarming with Muggles... until Merope saw that woman from Ollivander's wand shop, Mrs. Nott, her son, and a man who must be Mr. Nott. 'We'll follow them,' she said, nodding toward the family.

'Right,' said Tom.

It was ten minutes to eleven when they found their way through the brick barrier onto the correct wizarding platform. The Hogwarts Express gleamed in shining red and gold and green on the rails. All around them, parents were kissing their children goodbye, waving them off for a new term. Quite a few mothers had teary eyes as they sent their little first-years off.

Merope did not feel so alone in her feelings. She hugged Tom hard. 'You'd best get on the train, then, dear.'

He just nodded against her shoulder.

Merope thought he would push her away, accuse her of embarrassing him, but he did not. Her tears flowed freely down her face. 'If you're unhappy, or they don't treat you right, just send me an owl and you can come home,' she told him. 'It's not permanent. It's just school.'

Tom nodded again.

'Write to me, son, do you promise?'

Another nod.

It occurred to Merope that Tom had emotions, too, for all of his stoicism.

She helped him levitate his trunk onto the train and hugged him before he climbed up the stairs and into one of the cars. His pale face hovered in the glass of one of the compartments; Merope stood on the platform, crying but waving enthusiastically, telling herself to be strong for his sake. 'Bye,' she mouthed.

Tom waved at her with a hesitant hand. Then the train gave a great whistle and chugged out of the station, bearing its load of waving, excited students.

Merope waited until the train was out of sight before turning to go home.

'It's hardest with the first-years,' another woman commented to her. 'My daughter, Pandora. She's got two brothers at Hogwarts already, she has, but still...'

'How do they like it?' Merope asked.

'Ah, you know... All of them are in Gryffindor, so they get into trouble! I hope Pandora has the good sense to have a quiet year. And I hope she isn't sorted into Slytherin.' The woman shuddered.

'Mmm,' Merope said, feeling awkward.

'Oh! I'm sorry – you weren't in Slytherin, were you?'

'No, I wasn't.'

'Anyway, my name's Florence. Florence Piper. Good to meet you...'

'Merope Riddle,' she murmured.

'Good luck!' said Florence.

Merope glanced back at where the train had disappeared. She bit her lip and decided to go home and have an early cup of tea.

## Chapter Six

The owl pecked insistently at the window of Slug and Jigger's Apothecary. Merope retrieved the owl and recognised the green ink, Tom's favourite. She gave a hopeful look to Mr. Jigger, who tilted his head at her, allowing her a personal moment.

After untying the letter, she ran into the back storeroom, sat on a wobbly wooden stool, and began to read.

Dear Mum,

I'm sorry I haven't written sooner. I know it's been a week and you must be anxious, but I haven't had time. Things are busy here at Hogwarts. I guess I'll start with the first day. I met some other kids on the train who are my age, a boy named Lawrence and a girl named Pandora.

Merope stopped reading for a moment to smile. It must be that Florence woman's daughter.

We got to the station in Hogsmeade and an old man named Ogg led us to some boats. It was night-time by then. We crossed a lake – Mum, you should see Hogwarts! It's the biggest castle I've ever seen. It makes Buckingham Palace look like a cottage. There are towers and lights and it's surrounded by grass and a forest and the lake, of course.

All the first-years went into the Great Hall and we were called by our names to be Sorted. There's this old hat, see, and they put it on your head and it calls out which house you should be in.

I was real nervous when they came to my name, but then a strange thing happened. The hat didn't even touch my head, it was about three inches above, and it just screamed 'Slytherin.' The whole table clapped for me, polite-like... but Mum, I think the hat made a mistake.

After dinner, when I got to the Slytherin dormitories, which are down past the dungeons below the lake, a bunch of them surrounded me and asked me stuff. They asked about my name and if I was a – you know – a mudblood. Don't get mad at me for writing it, that's just what they said.

I told them no, that my mother was a witch but my father had been a Muggle, and that was just as bad. Mum, they called me a dirty half-blood and since then no one will talk to me. I've tried talking to the other boys in my dorm, but they act like I'm not even there. It's awful lonely.

More alarmed with each sentence, Merope felt righteous indignation building in her breast. How dare those children treat her son that way! Then a nasty voice that sounded like her father hissed in her ear. 'Because you married a filthy Muggle,' the voice said. 'That's why you have a son who doesn't fit in.'

'Shut up,' she said aloud. It worked, and she continued reading.

Classes have been pretty good though. I'm the best at everything. I usually sit with my friends from the train when I can – Pandora's in Gryffindor, and Lawrence is a Ravenclaw. I don't have to worry about them insulting me. I think I might learn some hexes just to defend myself. Two days ago, one of the older Slytherins snuck up behind me and tried to cast a *Furnunculus Curse*. I dodged it, but it was close.

Merope cried out. 'What kind of school is this?' she said aloud.

'Is there a problem?' Jigger poked his head into the storeroom.

'A letter from Tom,' she said, waving it at him. 'He was sorted into Slytherin, but now they're trying to hex him in the hallways! What kind of place is this, anyway?'

'Ah,' said Jigger. 'Probably because your late husband was a Muggle. Strange that Tom was sorted into Slytherin; I'd have taken him for a Ravenclaw. And Slytherin House hasn't admitted a half-blood in ages, to my knowledge. It's very rare.'

Merope's mouth twisted. Jigger did not know the whole story, and neither did Tom. And she was not about to enlighten them. She continued reading.

I was wondering, Mum... could you send Nagini to me? I know it's against the rules but I really miss her and it would be good to have a friend in the dorms, you know, to watch my back.

Love,

Tom

'My poor child,' she whispered to her hand. Her first reaction was to bring Tom home at once. He should not have to be teased and bullied just because of his parentage. Merope was one who knew that you could not help your relatives. She had suffered enough for being born into the Gaunt family. But what could she do for Tom?

His last request about Nagini made her decide: she would send the snake to Hogwarts. She wanted Tom to have his familiar with him at the very least.

It was a cool, grey morning, according to the light that shone through the windows of the Great Hall. Tom picked at his breakfast; there was no one sitting near him. He had been ejected from the house of snakes almost as soon as he'd arrived. For a moment he glared down the table at the group of fellow first-year boys: Cornelius Nott, Leonidas Lestrange, Ian Avery. And of course, there was Mulciber, the bully who'd learned his lesson from Tom two years ago with a brick to the head. Mulciber was a second-year, but he had not told his Slytherin housemates about the Knockturn Alley incident. Tom knew this was because the older boy did not want to lose face.

He sighed. The food at Hogwarts was very good but most of the time he did not even taste it. He was too miserable. Not in his classes; those were excellent. Tom felt his mind expanding every day and he was the most brilliant boy in his class. No, it was in the hallways, and the dorms, and during meals that Tom felt the cruel sting of Slytherin prejudice. They called him 'mudblood,' even though he was not.

Tom glanced over at the Gryffindor table. There sat Pandora Piper with golden hair. She was laughing with her housemates. And over at the Ravenclaw table was Lawrence Carter, demonstrating a Quidditch move; Lawrence had told Tom that he wanted to try out for the house Quidditch team next year.

For a moment Tom wished that he could find his own Hogwarts house and pick only those people that he liked. Pandora, for instance; she was too tricky to be in Gryffindor. She loved a practical joke. Had she not put Bubotuber pus in with the lavender leaves in Herbology, just to see what would happen? Professor Arnica had

been furious and given her detention, but she and Tom had a good laugh for fifteen minutes afterwards.

However, Tom could not sit with the Gryffindors or the Ravenclaws. He was a first-year and they were encouraged to mingle with their own house at first, although how he was supposed to become friends with them, he had no idea. Another wave of homesickness overcame him. Tom was miserable without his mother, and Nagini, and even old Mr. and Mrs. Jigger and Mr. Fortescue and the other adults he knew along Diagon Alley.

Beneath the table, he opened his book. He did not want the other Slytherins to see him reading: it was called 'Curses and Counter-curses,' by Vindictus Veridian. If his housemates were going to hex him, Tom was going to learn how to fight back with something meaner and nastier. A smile of grim pleasure spread across his face at the thought of Mulciber or Nott with boils on their faces.

There was a swooshing sound above Tom's head; he looked up to see the post-owls bringing the morning mail. He hoped there was a letter from his mother. It had been five days since he wrote to her.

Sure enough an owl came swooping down towards his head. The bird was off-balance due to a huge package dangling from its talons; it fell rather than flew towards Tom.

'Ooof!' he grunted as the bird plunged into his arms. The box was heavy. 'Here, bird,' Tom said, freeing the package and giving the owl the rest of his bacon. With a grateful hoot the owl took off again.

'Hey, what's that filth got?' Lestrange hollered down the table at Tom. 'Is it a teddy bear so you have a friend? 'Cause you haven't got any here.' The other boys and girls snickered.

'Did your blood traitor of a mother send you a prezzi, Tommy-Tom?' This came from Walburga Black, a thin dark-haired second-year girl with a snappish manner.

'Yes, in fact, she did,' said Tom. A smirk was on his face and the others looked puzzled. He could afford to be confident now; he'd heard Nagini's voice within the box. His familiar was with him. Now he had a friend in Slytherin House. Tom stood up to walk out of the

Great Hall, but before he went, he leaned toward Lestrange. 'And it's not a teddy bear.' He grinned at the boy, and it was not a nice grin.

Once he was out of the Great Hall, Tom felt free to run through the halls back to the Slytherin dormitory. He clutched the box to his chest. 'Almost there,' he hissed quietly.

The common room of Slytherin was grand, with tall gothic windows that looked out into the silvery, murky depths of the lake. A grindylow idled by, tentacles trailing after it. Tom did not notice. He could not open the box in the common room because there were witnesses. His own first-year dorm, however, was devoid of company and there Tom sat on his bed with the green coverlet and ripped open the box.

'Nagini!' he exclaimed.

'Tom!' the cobra hissed back. She reared up from the box and slithered around his shoulders, embracing him in her peculiar way.

Tom's grin spread from ear to ear. Nagini was larger than he remembered; her black scales gleamed over her five-foot-long body. She was perfect. None of those boys would sneak up on him in his sleep, not with a highly venomous Indian cobra guarding him...

'I missed you so much,' Tom said.

'It has not been very long, Tom,' she replied.

'Just two weeks, I know, but still... Is there anything from Mum in here?' He looked into the box. Sure enough, there was an envelope. He ripped it open with eager fingers.

Dearest Tom, Merope wrote.

I've sent Nagini to you – I hope the trip is not too hard on her. I got permission from Professor Slughorn after I explained that Nagini is a magically-bred and trained familiar from Magical Menagerie, and have enclosed a copy of his note, so you should not have trouble with keeping a snake.

Tom, I am so worried about you. You can come home. You don't have to go to school at Hogwarts – I can find a private tutor for you,

or send you to a different magic school, or anything you want. I'll make it work. I'm glad you've made a few friends, though. I think I met your friend Pandora's mother at King's Cross, after your train left.

If you need anything, you be sure and tell me. I'll do anything for you, darling, you know that, right? Be careful. Show them who you are.

All my love,

Mum

An uncomfortable lump had formed in the base of Tom's throat. Just to see his mother's scrawled handwriting... her suggestion about coming home... it was so tempting. He grasped the note in his hand, imagining his mother writing it, touching the paper, worrying about him. He saw the scrawled permission note from Slughorn and wondered how his mother had managed that one. Her efforts on his behalf made him miss her even more, and he blinked hard for a few seconds.

'What should I do?' he asked Nagini. 'Should I go home?'

'I came all this way,' the snake hissed back, curling up on his bed as though she owned it. 'I don't fancy a trip all the way back. Boxes are not comfortable, you know.'

'Sorry,' said Tom.

From beyond the door, he heard footsteps on the stone stairwell that led to the first-year dorm. 'Quick!' he hissed. 'Hide yourself!'

But Nagini was already gone.

Nott and Avery came through the door, laughing at some inside joke. They both sneered when they saw Tom.

'What's this?' Nott asked, snatching up the large package. 'Your mother sent you an empty box? She must really hate you.'

Tom was tempted to tell Nott to never mention his mother again. But he knew that would just give the other boy a clue to his weakness. 'Yes, empty,' Tom said. 'Puzzling, isn't it?'

The other two looked at him with suspicion. 'You're weird,' Nott muttered. 'Come on, Ian, let's go.'

'Yeah, let's go.'

They left him in peace. Tom, with the confidence boost of his familiar, knew what he should do next. The Slytherins would not respect him unless he bested them, won their loyalty. And he was a Parselmouth. According to Professor Slughorn, who had given them the history of Slytherin House on their first day, the last Parselmouth to be at Hogwarts was Salazar Slytherin himself. It ought to count for something.

Tom plotted his next move. He had Defense Against the Dark Arts first thing that morning, then Charms. He would wait a few weeks... he would wait until he could provoke an open attack from his fellow Slytherins. And then Nagini would make her grand entrance. A slow smile spread across his face. He hoped they did dare to attack him openly, Mulciber and Nott and Avery; he had a few jinxes up his sleeve that he wanted to try.

'Nagini?' he called.

'Yesss?' From beneath the bed.

'I need you to do something for me.' He outlined what he wanted her to do. She agreed, with her serpentine cunning, that it was an excellent plan.

Tom grabbed his books and ran for the door. For the first time since arriving at Hogwarts, he was looking forward to the day ahead of him.

'What is it, Tom?' Pandora whispered.

'You'll see,' he whispered back. 'Come on.'

'If it's something that'll fix the Slytherins, then it must be really nasty,' she said, wrinkling her nose.

'That depends on who's talking,' Tom said.

Tom and Pandora were in the Potions corridor, walking past the classroom, down further into the dungeons of the castle. For the time being Tom had sent Nagini down there to clean up the rat population. He'd introduced the snake to Slughorn (without revealing his Parseltongue ability) and had suggested the job for the serpent. He'd been very persuasive. Slughorn, who seemed to like Tom a great deal, said it was fine.

'So what's your big plan?' Pandora chattered. 'You've been in a good mood in classes lately.'

'What makes you think I have a plan?' Tom asked innocently.

'Because you have the look of someone with a plan,' Pandora said. 'I know, because it's the same feeling I have when I get a really good idea for a joke.'

Tom smiled. 'This way, now.'

They went down some old stone stairs with cobwebs lurking in the corners. This was a disused part of the castle; Tom wondered if they were technically allowed down here, but he had a good sense of danger. If old Pringle, the caretaker, was approaching, he was confident his intuition would alert him to it. He did not want Pandora to get in trouble.

'Tom?' Pandora asked. Her voice echoed through the dark, damp space.

'Lumos,' Tom said. A light flared from the tip of his wand. 'This way, little girl.'

'Don't you call me little girl,' Pandora grumbled. 'You're the same age as me, you know.'

'But I'm not a girl.'

'Hmph.'

They were silent for a few moments as Tom listened and watched for signs of his familiar. He stopped at a random place in the dungeons where the passage widened into a semi-room. Clearing his throat, he concentrated on calling Nagini.

'Ssahai shess a thah...' he called. 'Nagini hai.'

Next to him, Pandora's large blue eyes widened in the dark. 'Merlin's beard!' she breathed. 'You're a Parselmouth!'

Tom grinned at her, a flash of white teeth. 'Nagini!'

'Massster,' the cobra's voice echoed through the corridor.

'There,' Tom said in English, pointing.

Nagini slithered out of the shadow, all five feet of her, and Pandora let out a little squeak of fright, stepping behind Tom.

'Pandora, I'd like you to meet my familiar, Nagini,' Tom said formally. 'She's a cobra.'

'I-I can s-see that,' Pandora stammered. 'Um... are you even allowed to have a thing like that?'

'Nagini is not a thing!' Tom said, offended. 'She's my friend.'

'Right, sorry,' Pandora said, sounding sceptical. 'Er – what should I say to her?'

'Anything,' said Tom. 'She doesn't understand English. Only Parseltongue.'

Pandora licked her lips. 'Uh... snake?' she said in a shaky voice. 'That's a good snake.'

'Her name's Nagini,' Tom corrected.

'Sorry, Nagini. It's nice to meet you.' Pandora turned back to Tom. 'Are you crazy? That's a poison snake. It's dangerous! If you get caught with it you'll be expelled.'

'Actually, she's a venomous snake, and I won't be expelled. I got permission from Slughorn. I have a note from my mum, saying she's my familiar, and besides Sluggy likes me.'

Pandora rolled her eyes. 'So what are you going to do with it?'

'Nagini here is going to help me get revenge,' Tom said. He was torn between keeping his plans silent and wanting to brag about them; he figured that Gryffindor nobility would keep Pandora from talking. She was safe. 'I'm going to make sure that half of Slytherin House is around when I bring her out. And she'll take orders from me in Parseltongue.'

'But... Tom, isn't Parseltongue the mark of a Dark wizard?'

'Superstition!' Tom scoffed. 'I inherited it from my mum, and she's not Dark. She works at the apothecary. But if it is a Dark Art, then all the better. They'll respect me and they'll fear me. I'll make sure of it.' The intensity of feeling surprised even him.

'Do you mind if we go somewhere else?' Pandora asked. 'I mean, not that I don't love being in this creepy dungeon with a venomous snake and you, but I'm meeting Frank and Wolfie to do our Potions homework. You can come if you like.'

Tom smirked. 'That's only because you want my help.' He never helped other students with their homework unless he got a fair rate of exchange for his effort.

'I don't need your help, Tom Riddle!' Pandora declared, laughing. The fear was gone from her voice now; in fact, she was being rather loud.

'I'll come if Nagini can come,' said Tom. He wanted to remind Pandora of her situation.

'I'm not scared of your snake,' said Pandora, 'but Frank and Wolfie might be. And old Madame Grangier never let a great snake in her precious library. Sorry, you're uninvited.'

'Psh,' said Tom. 'Fine. I'll see you in class.'

'No, sir-ree! You're showing me the way out of this dungeon maze. Snake – er – Nagini – lead the way!' Pandora raised her arm as though leading a charge.

'Come with us, Nagini,' Tom instructed the snake.

Nagini slithered along behind them, hissing happily. Tom swore that the snake liked being told what to do and wondered if all females were that way. As he watched Pandora's blond braids swinging in front of him, he doubted she would take well to orders... but then again, Pandora wasn't really a female, she was a friend.

The Slytherin common room was full of whispers. They echoed off the stone walls, they hummed in the threads of the tapestries, they floated along on drafts of fire-warmed air. The snakes were discontent. There was something dirty in their lair, and they did not like it. Not these children of pure parents.

The problem was Tom Marvolo Riddle. He was a half-blood, which had never happened to Slytherin House before (at least, not in anyone's short-term memory) and yet he was the top of the first-year class. They had let it go on for too long, too many weeks. The covert hexes and hissed insults were not enough. The boy was a loner, yet walked with a cool arrogance that made them all feel secretly inadequate. He often held a smile as though he knew something they did not.

It was not just his attitude that irked the Slytherins. It was the company he kept. He spent his library time with those Gryffindors, Pandora Piper and Wolfin Fenwick. The students in other houses seemed to like him. The Slytherins would be happy to see him gone. No one had any use for a person who talked to mudbloods.

Of course, not all of Slytherin felt so vehemently against Tom Riddle. Not all of Slytherin had an obsession for blood purity. But the children of the ancient families, of Black and Nott and Lestrange, the children who had grown up with the lines drawn in the sand... their resentment of the dirty half-blood in their midst grew by the day.

Their Head of House deserted them when they tried to ignore Riddle. Everyone knew that Slughorn only liked the Riddle boy because he was good at Potions. And everyone knew that the Riddle boy was only good at Potions because his blood-traitor mother worked at the apothecary.

It was high time something be done about it. The harsh, cackling whispers of the girls, of Olive and Walburga and Lamb, grew to frenzied pitch beyond their young age. It was the echo of centuries of disapproval. And the boys, being boys, wanted action.

Tom knew it was the night when he crawled through the portrait hole into Slytherin House after a study hour in the library. Every face turned to look at him; every face was etched with censure. He kept his eyes fixed ahead and did not look. To be ignored was bad, but to be paid attention to was worse; Tom could see that something was afoot. He had taken to practising a few choice hexes in an empty classroom, and he had told Nagini to follow him surreptitiously through pipes and passageways whenever she could. He could sense her near him now.

A group of second- and third-year boys blocked his path to his dormitory. They had their wands out.

'Not so fast, Riddle,' said one of them, a boy named Pritchard. 'There's a funny smell in the air, and we figure it's you.'

'Yeah,' another echoed. 'It's the smell of Muggle. And we're sick of it.'

The entire common room went quiet. Confrontations were a spectator sport. Tom could feel the threat from all sides, could taste the anticipation of conflict. He felt like someone who had unwittingly wandered into a hostile animal's lair... but he had something they did not. He brought out his wand, but instead of attacking the group in front of him, he sent a jet of light down to the floor... and another, and another. It would make a triplet of vibration that Nagini knew as the signal to come to his aid.

'What was that, Riddle? Don't know how to point your wand?' The boys sniggered.

'I would be quiet if I were you,' said Tom, struggling to keep his voice calm.

'Oh, yeah? Why's that?'

'Because... because I wouldn't want you to get hurt,' Tom said. He was stalling for time. He hoped Nagini showed up soon so he could scare these bullies into submission. Going to the hospital wing with multiple hexes was not an option. 'Stand aside, please.'

The boys guffawed. 'Aw, see how polite he is,' one of them mocked.

Then, Tom heard what he had been waiting for: a shriek of surprise from a girl somewhere behind him. A few gasps. Nagini was on the scene.

He whirled around, hand extended. There was his serpent, swaying along, her hood extended into a terrifying triangle of warning. Her eyes glinted black and jet and cold beneath the witchlights. The common room was so quiet that the only sound was of the great snake's scales sliding along the stone floor.

'Hiss and spit at this lot,' he instructed in vitriolic Parseltongue. He raised his hand and pointed at Pritchard and his crew. 'Now, Nagini! Show them what an angry cobra looks like!'

The horror was thick in the room as Nagini reared up and hissed at Pritchard. She swayed back and forth as though taunting him. The gaze of every Slytherin was fixed on Tom, their ears disbelieving of the Parselmouth, their eyes fascinated by the sight of the great snake ready to strike.

Pritchard and the older boys froze in terror. Tom would laugh about it later, as he saw one of them wet himself.

'Now act like you're going to attack, but DO NOT harm them,' Tom hissed. 'It's a pretend game, Nagini. Harm no one, bite no one.'

She obliged him. Her white fangs were bared and she bore down on Pritchard, but drew away at the last moment.

'Now,' said Tom loudly. 'If any of you threatens me again, you will have her to answer to. This cobra is bound to me and is under my control. You will not dare to threaten me. You will not insult me. You will not hex me. And you WILL NOT mention anything about my family ever again! That applies to ALL of you!' He whirled around to glare at his housemates in turn. The utter compliance on their faces gave him a warm, tight feeling in his chest.

'That's enough, Nagini. Come with me.' He turned on his heel and walked away, Nagini following close at his heels. The door to his dormitory room had not quite closed when he heard the buzz, the roar, of conversation rise up in the common room.

For the rest of his first year at Hogwarts, Tom never had a problem with his housemates again.

## Chapter Seven

'Hey, Riddle, you should try out for Quidditch, mate. The rest of us are.'

Tom glanced up lazily from his book. He was lounged in front of the fire in the Slytherin common room. Cornelius Nott was looking at him eagerly, along with five or six other boys, most of them first- and second-years.

'Are you afraid to try out by yourselves?' Tom asked.

'Of course not,' Cornelius said, caught out, 'but we just reckoned you would want to. I mean, everyone knows you can fly.'

'I'll try out next year,' said Tom. 'Not this year, Cornelius.'

'Oh, fine,' said Cornelius, but there was deference in his voice.

It was not for disinterest that Tom would not try out for Quidditch in his second year. It was because the captain, George Hornby, would never take second-years and Tom knew better than to embarrass himself. The Slytherin Seeker would be graduating this year, leaving an opening on the team, and Tom was an opportunist. He liked everything to line up for him beforehand as much as he could manage it. Next year, he would try out as Seeker.

He watched Nott, Avery, and the rest of the crew scuttle off toward the Quidditch pitch, brooms in hand. None of them would make the team and Tom was tempted to watch the try-outs just to mock them, but he needed to make a run to the library instead. There were things to do there.

On the way to the library, Tom ran into Professor Slughorn, who clapped him on the back and chortled again over the perfect Hair-Raising Potion he'd concocted in the previous lesson. 'Aw, it's not me, Professor,' Tom said humbly, spreading his hands. 'It's my mum. She's a hand with potions. Taught me loads before I arrived here.'

'She did, did she?' Slughorn said, interested. 'Your mother is... Mary, is that right?'

'Merope,' Tom said, repressing a flare of annoyance. 'Merope Riddle.'

'Ah, yes, yes... I shall have to congratulate her on you, next time I'm in old Jigger's shop...'

Tom cleared his throat.

'Right! Run along, m'boy, I'm sure you're busy, with your class schedule...' Slughorn waddled off, shaking his large walrus-like head and laughing.

Rolling his eyes, Tom hastened to the library. It was not crowded on a Saturday morning; the only students in there were Ravenclaws. Tom waved to Lawrence Carter, who sat at a table with several girls. 'Morning,' he said.

'Hey, Riddle. Aren't you Slytherins having Quidditch try-outs today?' Lawrence asked.

'Yah, but I'm not trying out. Not this year, anyway. Hornby never takes second-years.'

'Same for us. Our try-outs were last weekend.' Lawrence's face was discontented. 'I was a better Keeper than the other bloke, but did they take me? No, of course not, I'm only a second-year.'

Tom shrugged. 'Sorry.'

'Eh, I'll show 'em next year.'

'We will, for sure. I've got to be getting on, but I'll see you around, yeah?' Tom said.

'Sure thing, Riddle,' Lawrence said. 'Bye.'

The girls at the table giggled.

Tom walked along the dusty stacks, inhaling the scent of old leather, taking comfort from it. He let his fingers trail along the titles in a caress of knowledge. He had a favourite table in the library, in a dark corner near the restricted section, a table that none touched.

He went there now, stopping off in the History of Magic section and pulling several promising tomes from the shelf.

It might have been an hour that he sat there, poring over the books, learning what he could. Once, he had heard Professor Dumbledore say that to be ignorant of history was to be doomed to its repetition. Tom did not want to be doomed.

The shaft of sunlight filtering through a small window above his head moved along the wall, kissed the top of a bookshelf, shone on a large book with an illegible title. Time passed, but what was time when a person was lost in a book? Books had no age. They were preservations, and while their pages grew dusty and cracked, the information within stayed new to the uninitiated mind that found it.

'I have an idea,' a voice interrupted Tom's academic quest.

He glanced up. It was Pandora, her hair messy around her face, her eyes sparkling and her breath heavy as though she'd run to find him.

Tom raised an eyebrow. 'Last time you had an idea, you ended up in the hospital wing for three days with hooves for feet.'

'This isn't like that,' Pandora said. She looked at the huge book before him, open to page eight-hundred and two. 'Whatcha readin'?'

'Just a bit of history,' said Tom.

'Ugh! How can you stand it? Old Binns' class is bad enough. I swear there's something wrong with you, Tom Riddle.'

'Are you going to tell me your idea or not? I'm very busy here.'

'I can see that,' Pandora said. 'Anyway, I'm brilliant. You know those nasty girls, Walburga and Olive?'

'I do know them.'

'I thought it would be hilarious to do a variation on those Transfigurations we learnt in class. Turning buttons into beetles and back again. I thought, if we turned their uniform buttons into beetles, without them knowing, of course... they would be covered in beetles and their skirts would fall down!'

Tom laughed. 'Pandora, you're behind the times. I'm getting along with my fellow Slytherins just fine lately.'

Pandora's face fell. 'You're no fun.'

'I didn't say you shouldn't do it,' said Tom. 'I just won't have an open hand in it. But I'll help you with practising, because I'd rather like to see it.'

She brightened again. 'That's what I like to hear! I was thinking after lunch in the corridors. Make sure no professors are around... Say, Tom, what are you doing? It's a Saturday and you're in the library reading History of Magic. Are you feeling all right? Do you have a fever?' Pandora reached across the table and put a hand across his forehead as though taking his temperature.

'I'm fine. I'm just... trying to find something about famous Parselmouths.'

'Ohhh,' Pandora said. She looked down at the book. 'Find anything?'

'No,' said Tom, allowing his delayed frustration to show. 'Nothing at all. Just that Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth and so was Herpo the Foul, some old Greek wizard from ages ago. Nothing helpful.'

'You should give it a rest,' Pandora chirped. 'I mean, it's not like it really matters, right? You're a Parselmouth and you're just you.'

'I 'spose...' Tom said.

'Come on. Let's get lunch, I'm starving. You should sit with us.'

"Er –" Tom liked Pandora, and he did not mind Wolfin Fenwick either, but he found the rest of the Gryffindors annoying. They were loud and lacked subtlety; Tom got headaches when he was forced to spend time with them. As difficult as he'd found Slytherin House at first, now he quite enjoyed his housemates, especially since he'd won their grudging respect that had turned to open admiration in many cases. 'I told Nott and Avery I'd eat lunch with them,' he lied. 'You know, to hear about how Quidditch try-outs went.'

'Boys and Quidditch,' Pandora said, although she herself was an avid supporter of the Wimbourne Wasps.

'Yeah, yeah,' said Tom. They walked into the Great Hall together and parted ways, each heading to an opposite side.

Amongst the crowd in Diagon Alley, Merope Gaunt Riddle did not stand out. That suited her fine. It was just turning to winter in 1939 and events were progressing far beyond the feelings of a single shopkeeper's assistant. In the large-ish square out front of Gringotts Bank, the Minister of Magic himself was scheduled to give a public speech, an answer to the threat of Germany. A dark shadow was spreading across Europe and the Muggle governments were already at war. The question on every witch and wizard's mind was, would the wizarding world follow suit?

The crowd was impatient. Feet stamped on the cold cobblestones and several people had bewitched teapots to float around, dispensing libation to the chilled onlookers. Merope smiled gratefully at her neighbour, an older woman, and conjured teacups for them both.

'When's 'e comin' out?' the old woman grumbled. 'I've seen war before and it ain't worth such a wait.'

'Must be any minute now,' Merope agreed. She was right... a hush swept across the crowd as a disturbance rippled through from the front. The Minister of Magic stepped up to the podium to a sudden burst of applause. Perceval Robards was a tall, thin man with a hard face. The applause was shushed when Robards raised his arms, signalling silence. He pointed his wand to his throat to activate the *Sonorus* Charm.

'Witches and Wizards of Britain,' he said. 'My speech to you will be short. The German Ministry of Magic has been usurped by a Dark Wizard who goes by the name of Grindelwald. This wizard is a criminal. He has been wreaking havoc across the continent and his influence extends to Germany's Muggle government, a vicious entity that means us nothing but harm. As you know, several months ago, a Dark army of German wizards, mountain trolls, and other demonic creatures crossed the border in an unprovoked invasion of Poland. The Polish wizarding community has been taken over.'

'We, along with our French allies, will not stand for this.' The Minister took a deep breath. 'The Wizengamot has voted unanimously. I stand by their decision. From this day forward, a state of war exists between the wizards of Great Britain and the Dark forces of Grindelwald. Stand with me against this threat. He means business, and so do we.'

A shocked silence fell over the crowd. Then, someone in the front started clapping. A roar began from the throats of the people... it spread across Diagon Alley in a great, pounding, applauding, screaming din. A scream for war. Merope let her teacup drop from her hands and it shattered on the stone beneath her. She was frightened by the mood and could not muster up the courage for such a thing as open war. It seemed to her that declarations got people killed.

Merope picked her way through the noisy crowd. All around her, cameras flashed to record the moment, and people shot patriotic sparks from their wands. Perhaps some of the crowd would decide to do a bit of shopping at the apothecary, since they were conveniently in Diagon Alley anyway, and Merope squirmed her way back along the street to her place of employment.

'What happened?' Jigger asked from inside. He looked older every year; his once fair moustache was now solid grey. His head was bald.

'War,' Merope announced breathlessly. 'It's war against Grindelwald.'

Jigger whistled through his teeth. 'Dark times, these are.'

'What should we do?'

'Just keep minding the shop, Merope. Just mind the shop.'

The beginning of the great war did not affect them at first. The wizarding world was not hampered with restrictions and rationing as Muggle England was; they did not have large troop numbers to supply or machines to build. The only visible difference was an increased number of red-robed Aurors wandering about, and a new Ministry policy that any 'suspicious' items purchased in wizarding

shops had to be reported. Naturally, many of the Knockturn Alley establishments ignored the rules.

Several weeks after the announcement, Hogwarts students were released for their Christmas holidays, and Merope went to Kings Cross to pick up Tom. She could not wait to see him. She wrote to him every other day, idle ramblings mostly, but she could not resist sending him letters. He did not write back as often, but he was busy with classes. Merope understood that. Still, when she threw her arms around him, she remarked, 'Haven't heard from you in awhile.'

'Sorry, Mum. I've been busy. Hey!' he wriggled away from her as she tried to kiss him on the cheek. 'You're embarrassing me,' he muttered.

'Oh, I'm sorry,' said Merope. 'Have an image to uphold, do you?'

'Yes,' Tom stated.

'At least hold my hand, then. Let's get your trunk.'

Tom wormed out of that grasp too, however. He seemed to be well-liked; a great many students bid him a happy holiday, even that skinny, pinch-faced Cornelius Nott. Tom had not been lying in his letters, then, and had resolved the differences with the Slytherins. A relief for his mother.

'Is Nagini in there?' Merope whispered to Tom in Parseltongue. She did not like speaking the language, but it was useful when she did not want anyone understanding her.

Tom nodded curtly. 'Oh, and Happy Christmas, Pandora,' he called to a blond girl.

'Happy Christmas, Tom!' Pandora said.

Florence Piper, the girl's mother, waved and nodded at Merope in acknowledgment. Merope just stared back until it was too late to return the greeting. She was not used to people being friendly with her. Potions business she could handle; friendship she could not. It was that old awkwardness in her own skin.

'Well, now,' Merope said as they got into a Muggle taxi to take them to Charing Cross road and the Leaky Cauldron, 'how has your term been?'

'Fine,' said Tom.

'Just fine?'

'Fine, really, Mum. Say, can we have shepherd's pie for dinner? They have it at Hogwarts but I like yours better.'

'That's what's in the oven, actually,' Merope said, pleased with herself for her foresight.

The flat had been given a thorough scrubbing and the floorboards, furniture, and windows shone with cleanliness. Merope had also gotten permission from Jigger to have a builder come in and magically expand the walls a little, so that Tom could have his own room. The tiny space was below the eaves and barely held room for a bed, lamp, and trunk, but it had its own small window and curtain. Merope was of the opinion that growing children should have their own room and she was proud of her two-room flat. Three rooms, if one counted the water closet.

'This is new,' said Tom, noticing the new door.

'That's your room,' said Merope. 'It's not much, but I thought it was better than that screen. That way I won't wake you up in the morning when I make coffee.'

'It's great, Mum. Thanks!' Tom opened the door and heaved his trunk through. 'Bit tight in here with the trunk, actually.'

Merope sighed. 'I know, there really isn't room to swing a kneazle, but...'

'Don't worry about it,' Tom said, reappearing with Nagini from his trunk. 'I'm hungry.'

Over the next several days Merope got more solid information about the goings-on at Hogwarts. Without pressuring Tom to speak about it, he told her about his classes, his professors, and his fellow students. She still thought the other Slytherins sounded like mean

children, but Tom assured her that they were all right, just misunderstood. 'A lot like us, Mum,' he said.

She was not sure if that was a good thing.

On the Saturday two days before Christmas, Merope decided they would go shopping on Diagon Alley for gifts. Tom insisted on going alone to buy her gifts, so reluctantly Merope agreed that they would split up. The crowds were enormous, people wandering around as much for gossip about the war as for Christmas shopping. After she said goodbye to Tom, Merope was stopped by several people, asking if she had seen Dumbledore, the Minister, or any other notables in the apothecary, and what they were buying. She mumbled that she had seen nothing, heard nothing.

They had a few Galleons to spend as a family this year, so Merope decided to get Tom a book on Egyptian magic, in which he'd expressed an interest. She was also knitting him a new scarf in Slytherin colours and some socks. And she knew that the Jiggers were buying him a nice new cauldron this year, due to Professor Slughorn's constant praise about the boy's Potions ability. It was a good thing that Tom's interests were so academic; it made it easy to buy him gifts that were both useful and enjoyable.

She finished her shopping at Flourish and Blotts, who were doing a good trade in newspaper subscriptions, and decided to take a wander without any goal in mind. Her wool cloak was belted tightly around her waist and she had a woollen hat to cover her hair. Next to the decorated, pine-festooned lamps and eaves of Diagon Alley, Merope felt quite drab. But she was used to that.

Her son was tall for his age. For that reason, she did not register him at first when he emerged from the lane leading to Knockturn Alley, accompanied by an even taller wizard. When Tom turned his face her way, saying something to the other wizard, Merope let out a gasp.

He was with Casper Malfoy.

'What?' she muttered to herself. An inexplicable fluttering feeling tumbled through her gut. One of her feet stepped forward toward them, the other stepped back. Her hands twisted in their mittens. A glance at the clock above Gringotts told her that it was about time

she met Tom... but did she have the nerve to speak to such an illustrious persona as Mr. Malfoy?

The crowd bore her forward, leaving her no room to make a decision. Tom had already seen her and waved.

'There's my mum,' she heard him say to Malfoy.

Her tongue was a lead weight in her mouth and she just looked at the blond wizard.

'Ah, Mrs. Riddle,' said Malfoy. He had a foreign tinge to his accent but his English was otherwise perfect. 'It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Casper Malfoy.'

The silence from Merope was filled with the noise of Diagon Alley. It was not until Tom nudged her that she said, 'Oh! Er – hello, Mr. Malfoy.' She pretended that she was in the apothecary, safe behind the counter, greeting a wealthy customer. Pretending made it easier. 'Merope Riddle. Nice to meet you.' More words than she'd ever imagined saying to the man.

'I met Mr. Malfoy on Knockturn Alley,' said Tom.

'Well, what were you doing down there?' Merope admonished. She knew Tom went wherever he pleased, but she did not want to appear a bad mother in front of Malfoy.

'It's not the first time your son has been to Knockturn Alley,' said Malfoy. He seemed amused.

Merope looked up at him. He was quite a bit taller than she, and older. She thought he must be about forty. He had crinkles around his eyes but his white skin was otherwise smooth; the face was not handsome, but could be considered distinguished. An aristocratic coldness in his eyes reminded Merope of her former husband.

'Don't tell her that,' Tom said quickly.

'I thought so,' Merope mumbled. 'Come on, Tom, let's not bother this man any longer.' She turned to Malfoy. 'I'm sorry, sir, I'm sure you have better things to do than look after wayward schoolboys.'

'I don't, actually,' said Malfoy. 'In fact, Mrs. Riddle, I'd like to speak with you. Do you mind if we stop somewhere? The Augerey's Claw has fine cider this time of year.'

'Isn't that on Knockturn Alley?' Merope asked. For the life of her she could not imagine what business a person like Casper Malfoy had with her.

'It is perfectly reputable,' Malfoy assured them. 'It will be my treat, for the holidays, and my young friend here.'

Merope began to feel that she was missing something. 'Do you already know him?' she asked Tom.

'Well, yes,' said Tom. 'He's the one who helped me find Nagini, isn't he?'

Merope stared at the back of the tall wizard who was leading them into Knockturn Alley. So he had been Tom's benefactor those years ago... she could have kicked herself for not making Tom tell her details of how he acquired Nagini. She had been so afraid that he'd stolen the snake, and then he'd been upset with her for accusing him, that she'd never followed up on it.

The Augerey's Claw was a small hole-in-the-wall pub about fifty metres down Knockturn Alley, directly across from Borgin and Burke's. The clientele was predictably dodgy, although the pleasant smells of baking bread and fresh cider wafted from the door. Malfoy opened the door and ducked inside, followed by Merope and Tom. The pub was no larger than the Riddles' flat, with a smattering of tables and a short bar behind which rows of various hard liquors winked dimly in the light. The barkeep stood up a little straighter when Malfoy came in and commenced wiping the counter with a green, pungent rag.

In the corner, a hooded wizard spoke in conversational tones to what appeared to be himself. Otherwise the place was deserted. 'Let us sit,' Malfoy said, gesturing to a table near the grimy window with three ancient chairs pulled up around it.

Tom continued telling Malfoy about Nagini's exploits at school and how he'd needed to hide her from his most of his professors. The

snake was evidently what they'd been speaking of when they ran into Merope. Malfoy seemed only to encourage the rule-breaking.

After ordering three mugs of cider, Merope decided it was time she enter the conversation. 'Mr. Malfoy,' she said softly when she got the chance.

'Ah, yes, Mrs. Riddle. I'm sorry, you must have heard all these stories before.'

'Not all of them,' Merope admitted. She was a little disturbed at the way Tom flouted the rules, in fact, but would wait until they were home to admonish him.

'Let us come to the reason I invited you here today,' said Malfoy.

Tom looked between his mother and Malfoy, expectant but not surprised. A small glint lurked in his eyes.

'I am aware,' said Malfoy, lowering his voice, 'that your son is a Parselmouth, Mrs. Riddle, as are you.'

She fidgeted in her chair. 'Yes...'

'A rare and unique ability, to be sure.'

'It seems to be.'

'May I ask, who are your parents?'

A faint note of alarm sounded in Merope's head. She did not want investigations into family backgrounds... it would lead to too much. Her Gaunt relatives, and the fact that her ex-husband was still alive and well (to her knowledge) in Little Hangleton... 'My parents were both wizards,' Merope said.

'That's not a real answer, Mum,' said Tom. 'You never talk about your family. I don't even know their names. And when the kids at school ask, I have to say I don't know. And then they make fun of me.' He blinked at her with hurt innocence and the ploy worked; Merope felt guilty at never having told Tom about his background.

But what could she say with this wealthy stranger sitting between them? Casper Malfoy, for whatever reason, had his interest piqued by the wizarding Riddles. Merope was not comfortable telling him very much, not least because of that fluttery feeling in her stomach that would not calm down. It was rather like the sensation she'd once had around the young handsome Muggle neighbour.

'My family... were not very nice,' she began. 'My mother died when I was two years old. I don't remember anything about her. Her name was Siobhan. That was your grandmother,' she said to Tom. 'And my father... Marvolo, of course... raised me, along with my older brother Morfin.'

'You have a brother?' Tom asked, his voice quick and high.

'I had a brother,' said Merope. 'I don't know what's become of them. They were sent to Azkaban, you see, for cursing a Muggle and then assaulting a Ministry official.'

'I found those records,' said Malfoy. 'The trial of your brother, Morfin, who viciously hexed a local Muggle by the name of Tom Riddle.'

'Hey-!' Tom interjected.

'Yes,' Merope sighed. 'He did. He hexed your father, Tom.'

Tom's expression was thirsty for more, yet Merope did not feel comfortable in the situation to tell him. 'Wait, Mr. Malfoy,' she said. 'What were you doing, researching that? Isn't that information secret?'

'Even in the Ministry of Magic, things can be bought and paid for,' said Malfoy.

She narrowed her eyes at him. 'Just what do you know?' she asked cautiously, hoping, praying that he had not delved further.

'Just that,' said Malfoy. 'The rest would require serious investigation.'

'Mmm,' said Merope. The writing was on the wall. Tom was too curious. And now he had an apparent friend with the resources to uncover it all... she would have to come clean. But not now, not in this grimy pub in front of an intimidating stranger. She furrowed her

brow; who was Casper Malfoy, really? His accent was foreign. His motives were unknown. And there were Dark wizards about; were they not at war?

'Tell me, Mr. Malfoy,' Merope said in a very careful, soft tone, 'what is your opinion on blood purity?'

Malfoy leaned back in the creaky old chair. 'My views are not extreme,' he said. 'Granted, my younger brother and sister have far more strict opinions on the matter. They believe pureblood wizards deserve special privileges. My late father believed the same. However, I – I've been proven otherwise too many times. I've travelled the world a great deal more than Abraxas. I have seen half-blood wizards and yes, even Muggle-borns, with great ability. There does not seem to be much of a difference in skill, intelligence, or magical ability. I am pragmatic about the matter.'

'You're dodging the question,' said Merope. 'You've told me what you've seen, but not what you think.'

'Any residual prejudice I had against those with Muggle blood was dispelled when I met your son, Mrs. Riddle. Tom here is a rather extraordinary wizard. That a half-blood would be a Parselmouth... naturally it led me to you. I am curious as to where it came from.'

'Why should Parseltongue have to be inherited?' Merope said. 'Somewhere along the line, my family became Parselmouths. So?'

'It's just interesting,' said Malfoy. 'Especially in light of certain events in Europe. You do know that the Dark Lord Grindelwald places a high value on blood purity. His entire campaign and its... aftermath... in Poland is based on it.'

'What does that have to do with us?'

'Nothing, yet,' said Malfoy, and to Merope his use of the word 'yet' disturbed her a great deal.

'Mum, Mr. Malfoy thinks that Grindelwald will attack Britain soon,' said Tom. His dark eyes were intent upon her face.

'Not really!' Merope gasped.

'He will target all those with Muggle blood and Muggle connections,' Malfoy said grimly. 'Your family background might exempt you from harm, Mrs. Riddle, but your boy's father...'

'I see,' Merope said. She had been so stupid. Bringing young Tom into the world with so much prejudice, so much burden, on him... he was an outsider to Muggle and wizarding world alike. The poor child. She leaned over and squeezed his hand; unlike at the train station, Tom did not move away, but rather gave her a comforting half-smile.

'My purpose in treating you here today was to pledge my outlook for your welfare,' said Malfoy. 'Tom, like I've said, is an extraordinary young wizard. He will go far. I would hate to see the pureblood politics of Europe interfere with his – or your – safety.'

'Thank you for warning us,' Merope whispered. She managed a smile for Casper Malfoy.

'I've been researching famous Parselmouths at the Hogwarts library,' Tom added. 'Perhaps I'll uncover something there.'

'Perhaps,' Malfoy mused.

Merope's heart skipped a beat; her heart was well behind her now. It had been a day of skipped beats. Tom was a brilliant boy. If he was researching the Gaunt family history at Hogwarts, he would discover their lineage. It was inevitable. Her deception was cracking apart. She would have to tell him, and soon... 'Thank you again, Mr. Malfoy,' Merope said, eager to end the conversation.

'It is a pleasure. Take care of yourself, Mrs. Riddle, Tom. I will be in touch.' Malfoy smiled, dipped his head to them, and left.

The pub seemed a bit too smoky all of a sudden; although it was only the soliloquising wizard in the corner who huffed on a pipe, Merope's eyes smarted with tears. Why was it that whenever Casper Malfoy made an entrance on her day, other, larger events surrounded it? He was trouble for her, and trouble for her son, although Tom seemed to think otherwise.

To Tom, Malfoy was something to look up to, a man of wealth and power and authority. Merope could see it quite plainly. Almost a father figure...

A glittering spindle of imagination pierced her mind. Could a man like Casper Malfoy ever be interested in her? No, she scoffed internally, knowing she was too ugly, too strange, too... awkward. Unless she did that other thing, the thing that had allowed her to be with Tom... but it was far too risky. Yes, too risky, for in the wizarding world such things were known. It was one thing to bewitch an unsuspecting Muggle. It was another bag of beetle-eyes to trick a wizard of Malfoy's stature into matrimony.

When they arrived home, Tom darted into his room and Merope heard the lock click. He wanted to be alone and she could not blame him.

She glanced down at her hands. They were calloused from chopping ingredients and the fingernails were kept short. She rubbed her spindly arms, and touched her lank hair. As though morbidly drawn, she stood up and stepped into the water closet, gazing into the mirror above the sink. A weary face looked back at her. A face with too pointed a chin, too wide a forehead, eyes too far apart, lips too thin. At least she had gotten her cross-eyes fixed at St Mungo's a few years ago, but their colour was still the dull blue of a muddy lake reflecting a pre-dawn sky. A sigh escaped her lips.

No, Merope was not beautiful by anyone's standards. She touched the skin of her cheek; it was smooth but pale. The hair falling in strings around it was a drab, mousy brown. Her problem was that she compared herself to the noble likes of Roxanne Malfoy, or the lovely witches who appeared in Hatter's, the wizarding society magazine. For all Merope's 'noble' lineage (she let out an unattractive snort) she would never appear in those glossy pages.

Yet... Merope had grown into herself a little bit over the years. Her cheeks had lost their baby-fat heaviness and at least she kept her eyebrows trimmed into pleasant arches over her staring eyes.

A whim floated forward. She would not be a beauty, but there were a few things witches could do. Grabbing her cloak and mittens and hat, and a small bag of coins, she scribbled a note for Tom: 'Running an errand – forgot something. Back for dinner, love.'

Merope was grateful for old Jigger's advice. He'd helped her with her financial planning so that she had enough for Tom's tuition and second-hand school supplies, with enough left over for incidentals. The interest from the Gringott's account covered a monthly stipend so she did not have to touch the principal for extras. Besides, her errand on Diagon Alley should not cost very much.

It was nearly five o'clock in the afternoon but wizarding London was no less crowded. Many of the shops would be open until nine or ten on account of the Christmas rush. Jigger was minding the store, as Merope would be working from the next day onwards. It was thus her last chance for personal business for a few days.

Booted feet carrying her forward, Merope spotted the sign: Callista's Salon for Witches. She'd never visited the place, but then, she'd never felt the need to. She prayed there was no one she knew inside. It was rather embarrassing. She ducked her cloaked head as she pushed open the door.

'Good afternoon, miss,' said a perky witch behind the counter. 'Do you have an appointment?'

'N-no, I'm sorry,' said Merope.

'That's all right... walk-ins welcome... what would you like done?'

'My hair,' said Merope, pushing her cloak and hat off her face.

The young witch pursed her lips in vague disapproval. 'Oh, yes, I see. There is some work to be done.' She ran a perfectly manicured nail down the rows of her appointment book. 'Eavan has an opening. She can help you.'

'All right,' said Merope.

'Wait here,' the witch gestured at a poufy red loveseat. 'I'll get her.' The receptionist disappeared behind a curtain; large wooden screens separated Merope from the view of the establishment.

Merope sat, her hands clasped self-consciously in her lap. From the rest of the salon she could smell the distinctive scent of beauty potions, hair potions, and perfumes. She could name most of the

ingredients, but was worthless when it came to using them. What if the hairdresser told her she was a hopeless case?

'What's your name?' the receptionist popped her coiffed head back out.

'Merope Riddle.'

'Right.' She disappeared again.

After waiting several minutes, Merope contemplated darting back out the door and into the safe, non-judgemental habit of her own ugliness, when a different witch came out.

'My name is Eavan,' she said. 'Are you Merope?' She sounded as though she hoped Merope was not.

Merope nodded.

'Hmm,' said Eavan, who looked about forty and had long, perfect eyelashes and a round, perfect face. 'This will be a challenge.'

Pure misery, to be subjected to such open contemplation of her looks, but Merope had to do it. She had to do something to feel better about herself now that the one of the world's top wizards was hanging around.

'Come with me,' Eavan said briskly. 'I'll see what I can do.'

The witch led Merope through a maze of corridors. Between the wooden screens, Merope caught glimpses of witches having their hair washed, witches sitting in clouds of purple steam, witches with green goo on their faces, witches with hands outstretched so that bustling house-elves could work on their nails. It was very bewildering.

'Here,' said Eavan. 'Take off your cloak and scarf and wear this over your clothes.' She handed Merope a black cotton robe. 'We'll be using potions that can stain.'

Following instructions without a word, Merope sat down in a chair as she was told, and Eavan got to work. The operation was conducted with military efficiency. One potion, then another, then another, went

on Merope's head. Eavan insisted on sending in a witch to show Merope how to use cosmetics. Then, as though Merope were a trial sent by the beauty gods to test Eavan's mettle, Eavan had a house-elf come in and told the creature to 'do something with those ghastly nails.' And, Eavan said, there would be no extra charge. It was on the house for Christmas.

After the potions came the charms. Eavan handed Merope a small soft-cover book that said 'A Witches' Guide to Beautification Charms.' Inside were diagrams showing hair-removal spells, eyelash-curling spells, even a spell to tie a perfect hair ribbon.

Feeling tugged and doused and pulled in many directions, Merope was released an hour and a half after entering the beauty salon. Eavan glanced her over, arms crossed, and gave a nod. 'It'll do,' she said. She conjured a mirror that hovered in front of Merope's face.

Merope's features were as unfortunate as they'd ever been. But her lank hair was tinted a deeper chestnut brown and teased into attractive, glossy curls around her face. Her eyelashes looked longer and more curved; Eavan handed her a tube of something called Eye Fringe Potion and said, 'Do the eyelash-curling charm with it.' Merope's skin looked more luminous, thanks to a dusting of fairy powder, and her cheeks held an attractive rosy glow. She looked normal.

'Oh,' was all she could say.

'Not bad, is it? I daresay you were in a state when you came in, but this should fix you up. Most of your problem is just letting yourself go,' said Eavan. The witch must have been in the business for years, because she did not seem to care about offending Merope's feelings. She stated beauty as a problem to be solved, an equation quantifiable with potions, charms, and attention.

'Thank you,' said Merope. She was handed a basket full of the correct potions to maintain the look.

When she paid her four Galleons, quite a price for the salon, Merope did not feel that she'd misspent her money. She became chilly on the short walk back to her flat because she left her new hair uncovered so the curls did not go limp.

Tom was sitting on the sofa, reading, when Merope stepped through the door. She felt a nervous, as though her son would see no difference in her. It was an unfounded thought.

His brows came together in puzzlement when he looked up from his book. 'What did you do?' he asked.

'You don't think it looks good?' Merope asked, patting her curls.

'Uh... no, it looks really nice, Mum. Suits you. You look pretty.' A dawning suspicion crossed Tom's face. 'Is this because of Mr. Malfoy? Do you fancy him?'

'No!' Merope said a little too quickly. 'No, I just thought because it was Christmas, and... we finally have a few extra Galleons to spend.'

'Uh huh,' said Tom. He shrugged his thin shoulders. 'You should have told me. I would have gotten you one of those new what's-its... a gift certificate.'

Merope smiled. 'That's all right. I think we'll have plenty to exchange on Christmas morning.'

'Yeah,' said Tom. He dropped the subject of Casper Malfoy after that. And Merope promised him that, come Christmas day, she would tell him all she knew about their family. Tom agreed, willing to put off the gratification of his curiosity for a few more days... and it gave Merope the time she needed to figure out how to word things.

How did a mother tell her son that he was the only surviving heir to a famous line of Dark wizards?

## Chapter Eight

Christmas of 1939 saw the coldest December weather in almost fifty years. The snow piled up and children tumbled about along streets that held no traffic. Warming charms and magical fires were stretched to their limits in houses throughout wizarding Britain. As for the Muggles, Tom Riddle could only imagine how cold they must be. Although his mother had told him many stories about Muggle life, he could not picture it for himself.

Outside their attic flat, great drifts of white crystals built up to form fabulous patterns on the windowpanes. Smoke from fires, magical and Muggle alike, rose from narrow chimneys and floated above the wintry city to mingle with snowflakes. It looked unreal to Tom as he gazed out his tiny bedroom window, still in his pyjamas and wrapped up in a warm woollen blanket.

He had been looking forward to this day, and not just because of the gifts he expected. His mother had promised to tell him about their family history. He would learn the things she'd been so reluctant to talk about in front of Mr. Malfoy. A part of him hoped they had a hidden fortune somewhere. Then he would never have to endure the embarrassment of wearing school robes that were faded and worn.

A soft knock sounded on his door. 'Tom?' his mother's voice said. 'Are you awake, sweetheart?'

'Yah,' he said. He stood up from his curled position and opened the door.

'Happy Christmas!' Merope said, hugging him.

'Happy Christmas,' Tom agreed. His eyes sought the tiny tree in the corner, beneath which rested a small but promising pile of wrapped packages.

'Go on, then,' Merope said, nodding at him.

He scrambled past the sofa, remembering to stop and give Nagini a good-morning pat on the head. The snake was coiled on top of the stove, shivering dramatically as though she were stranded in the snow; Tom and his mother both knew it was an act designed to win sympathy. 'Oh, give it a rest,' Tom said in Parseltongue.

Nagini's tongue flicked out at him, but she ceased her melodrama.

The first package Tom opened was from Mr. Jigger. It was a brand-new cauldron and scale set in handsome brass. A definite improvement over his current cauldron, which was made of iron and had so many dents and pockmarks that Tom was surprised it held anything at all.

'That's a nice cauldron,' said his mother, who curled up on the sofa with a mug of coffee in her hands.

'Oh, thanks, Mum! I've been wanting this,' he said when he opened a book on ancient Egyptian magic. It had an eye of Horus on the front cover that blinked at him; he could almost hear the call of knowledge from beyond.

In all, it was a good year for gifts; he got socks (boring), a scarf (all right), and a box of his favourite fairy-made fudge from Honeydukes. Tom had a fine time watching his mother open her gift, as well; he'd spent his entire allowance on an amethyst pin. It was in the shape of a starburst flower, with a single glittering gem in the centre. Merope exclaimed over it and kept turning it over in her hands. 'Oh, it's lovely, Tom,' she said. 'It looks like something a very high lady would wear.'

'That's why I got it for you,' he said sincerely, but he was pleased with the self-conscious blush that worked across her face.

They ate a breakfast of sausages and muffins and hot chocolate. They opened Christmas crackers. Even Nagini got a sausage and a small bowl full of warm milk.

Hanging over the day, however, was the spectre of the past, of secrets cracked open and gleaming from within, ready to be reborn. For some inexplicable reason, Tom felt shy about bringing up the subject of his father, his grandparents, his ancestors. He did not want his mother to get those tears in her eyes. That would ruin Christmas for sure. And Tom hated for things to be ruined, he hated waste, and he hated imperfection.

'Do you want to read your book for awhile?' his mother said as she cleared up the dishes.

But Tom could not delay anymore. 'Mum, you said we could talk about the family today.'

Merope's back was turned and she was quiet. Tom waited anxiously for her voice. 'Yes,' she finally said. 'Now's as good a time as any.'

They sat down by the woodstove. It made pleasant whistling noises as the fire crackled within. And it was there, sitting in her rocking chair with her flannel robe tied over her warm winter nightdress, that Merope began a story.

Her parents, she said, were called Marvolo Gaunt and Siobhan Peverell. They were first cousins, each from old pureblood families, and each poor. Once upon a time the Gaunts had a fortune, but it was squandered centuries ago, and by the time Marvolo was born they were held fast in the depths of poverty. Various branches of the family died out; it was considered lucky that Marvolo and Siobhan had two children.

Morfin was the elder and, Merope was sorry to say, he was barely human. An ugly, apelike, staring face was the front for a diseased, psychopathic mind. Tom's uncle Morfin had no feelings, or so she said. Just animal cunning and brute strength. Last she heard he was in Azkaban. His sentence must be over, but Morfin would never go looking for her, because he could not read.

'Read what?' Tom asked.

The note that she'd written. When she fell in love with Tom Riddle Sr., she wrote a quick note to her father explaining what she'd done, that she'd married a Muggle and left forever. Whether her father was dead or alive, she did not know; she'd heard nothing of the Gaunts since she became Mrs. Riddle.

'And what about my father?' Tom asked.

His mother took a deep breath as though engaged in internal debate. She shook her head. 'He was an aristocrat. A Muggle, of course, but his family was very wealthy... they did not approve of me, a witch. I have no contact with them. And they want none with us. It doesn't matter, Tom,' she said, for a dark feeling showed itself on Tom's

features, 'they were snobs. Not worth knowing. We can make our own friends, can't we? Here in our world. The wizarding world.'

'I 'spose,' he said, although Tom would have liked to see his grandparents. A part of him wanted their approval, their amazement at his powers, as though his mother's pride in him was not enough.

'There's something else,' said Merope. Her hands clenched the fringe on the afghan blanket in her lap. 'The reason, I think, why Mr. Malfoy is so interested in our family background. You know we're Parselmouths... all of us. My father, my brother, me, and you... Tom, there's a reason why the ability to speak to snakes is connected with the Dark Arts. It's because the most famous Parselmouth of all was something of a Dark wizard...'

'Salazar Slytherin,' Tom finished for her. 'But what does that have to do with us?'

'It has everything to do with us,' said his mother. 'Because we are his last descendants. Through my father and the Gaunts, we are the heirs of Salazar Slytherin.'

Tom could not breathe. It could not be... it was not possible... that he, the ridiculed half-blood of Slytherin House, be the heir to its founder? He hissed through his teeth. A serpentine sound. A crawling sensation prickled over his skin. Something reared up inside him, an ancient voice that whispered of power, a surging lust before he was old enough to define the word.

'Tom? Are you all right?'

He met his mother's gaze. She looked scared. He knew what thoughts passed behind her eyes: would he be angry with her for not telling him sooner? But Tom could not muster anger. No, even in his shock, he knew that this knowledge was sweeter now than it could have been a few years ago. Now he had reason to feel exultation at holding the trump card over his schoolmates. What once held him back had become his strength: his unsavoury Muggle background, and his mother's poverty-stricken family. Now that family was the thing that would elevate him to the place he knew he belonged.

It explained everything.

'Would you have told me if Mr. Malfoy hadn't come into it?' he asked her.

'Of course, Tom. I was waiting for the right moment... I didn't want you to grow up as I did. Hearing nothing but how superior we are, how other wizards are dirty and foul and traitors to our kind. Your grandfather Marvolo... he didn't love me for who I was. Only for whose blood ran in my veins. I couldn't put that burden on you. I wanted you to be who you are.'

Tom licked his lips. The truth was that he was jubilant at the thought of his famous ancestor. It was unbearable to be as good at wizardry as he was and come from such an ignominious background. To hear that he was the Heir of Slytherin was every confirmation he'd ever hoped for. Yet, listening to his mother's words, and the pain in her voice as she spoke, he wondered if he would feel the same if he'd grown up knowing it. Would he feel defined by Slytherin's blood? Would he have felt the same need to prove himself to himself?

He moved from his place on the sofa and made to sit on the floor, by his mother's knees. He grasped her cold, clammy, shifting hands. Neither one of them said anything.

They stayed that way, mother and son, for a long while. Thoughts whirled through Tom's mind like a tornado as he knelt on the floor. He wondered how things would change now; he wondered who he would tell of his ancestry. Mr. Malfoy, for sure; he would be interested and Tom felt that he owed him that much. The professors at Hogwarts? No, thought Tom. Not yet. Not the students either... he would save the revelation for a time when it would give him the maximum benefit. It was the ace up his sleeve.

Thinking back on his Sorting as a first-year, he decided it was no wonder the hat was so quick about naming him a Slytherin, despite his half-blood status. That should have been his first clue. He wondered whether the hat was keyed to the magic of the founders' descendants...

'Mum?'

'Yes, dear?'

'You didn't go to Hogwarts, did you?'

'No. None of the family has. Not since Salazar Slytherin left the school.'

'Oh.' That answered Tom's question, whether he was the first of Slytherin's line to attend Hogwarts. It raised a number of interesting possibilities. 'What about your brother? Uncle Morfin?'

She shuddered. He wondered why. Then she said, 'Morfin would never have been accepted at Hogwarts. He's... not right.'

Tom frowned. 'But if I'm the Heir of Slytherin, what about him? He's the older one, so wouldn't it pass to him?'

'It's not a title, Tom, for Merlin's sake. Don't let it go to your head.'

'But does Morfin have any children?'

A pause. 'No.'

'How d'you know for sure?'

'I don't want to talk about Morfin anymore,' said his mother, and this time Tom knew he didn't imagine the sob inside her voice. 'Please? You know about Slytherin now. Let's just enjoy the rest of the day, hmm?'

He nodded earnestly. 'Of course, Mum. Anything.' He stood up and gave her a hug, not sure why he felt it necessary, since he was too old to be showing affection to his mother so openly. He was too hip for that. But still... the tears glistening at the corners of Merope's eyes told him that the gesture was appreciated.

'Now,' she said, dabbing her eyes with the edge of her sleeve, 'let me check on that goose in the oven. Nagini will be wanting a bit of it, eh?'

Tom nodded. He spent the afternoon flipping through his new book on Egyptian magic, but for once he did not pay attention. Instead of hieroglyphs and pyramids, his mind's eye saw ancestors going back a thousand years to one of the greatest wizards of all time... a wizard whose blood survived in Tom Marvolo Riddle. He smiled.

The May sunshine tickled the back of Tom's neck as he sat near the Hogwarts lake, a book open in his lap. His robe was cast aside, leaving him in rolled-up shirtsleeves that exposed his pale, skinny arms to the warmth. He'd kicked his shoes off for comfort. Next to him was a stack of books; the librarian, old Madame Grank, had not been happy about letting him take so many books outside, but he'd charmed the old bat with a disarming smile and an assurance that no harm would come to them. It was far more enjoyable to do research outside with the weather so nice. This was especially true for History of Magic.

As he flipped through the pages of 'Dark Wizards, Past and Present', Tom lifted his eyes at the sound of shouting and splashing. He smiled vaguely as Mulciber and a couple cronies tossed a first-year Hufflepuff into the lake. Then he was glad he was not with them as a Gryffindor prefect came storming up and gave them all detentions.

It was the last week of his second year at Hogwarts. The term had been a beautiful one for Tom. Armed with the new knowledge of his ancestry, he had been so confident in himself and his abilities that every homework assignment, every class, had been easy. And the few remaining Slytherins (mostly older students) who dared to look at him askance because of his Muggle name... Tom had ignored them as the meaningless people they were, because he was the Heir of Slytherin.

Then, as the capstone to it all, three weeks ago Tom had been in the common room with the other boys of his year: Nott, Avery, Lestrange, and a couple of the third-year girls, Walburga Black and her cousin, Lucretia Black. They had been lounged around the less-comfortable benches toward the back of the common room, because the older students claimed the deep leather armchairs near the fire. Passing around sweets and speaking in general terms, Tom had been ready to leave the conversation and spend some quality time with his Potions homework when Walburga had made a reference that caught his attention.

'Well, those foul little Gryffindors had better watch out,' she'd said, speaking of the near-universally loathed house, 'in case someone sets Slytherin's monster on them!'

Laughter. Tom perked up and waited for someone to elaborate.

'What's the story of Slytherin's monster, anyhow?' Ian Avery asked, chomping on a piece of liquorice. 'I've never heard of it.'

Lucretia and Walburga exchanged sly looks. 'Well,' said Walburga, lowering her already-low voice, 'the legend goes that before Slytherin left the castle, he built a chamber in the deepest part of the dungeons. He put a monster in it, a monster that could only be controlled by his heir. No one knows what it is. My mother told me the story,' she bragged.

Tom's mouth had gone dry. His heart pounded so hard that he was surprised the others couldn't hear it thudding away in his chest. None of the other Slytherins had known more than Walburga about the monster, and the conversation soon turned to more definite subjects, such as their upcoming exams. But it was enough for Tom. He threw a sort of feverish revision into his exams, passing them without worry, and in the last week of term he had undertaken a different kind of research.

If, as Walburga Black claimed, there was a monster that could be controlled only by Slytherin's heir, Tom wanted to be one hundred percent positive he was descendant. If he could find absolute proof of his line, then he would go looking for this chamber and the monster it contained. He believed his mother, of course, and the power of Parseltongue gave him near-certainty... but it was not enough. The next moves would require care and surefootedness if he was to be confronting a deadly creature.

And so he'd started delving deep into the magical history books again, looking for himself. He'd also written to Casper Malfoy with the information, but Malfoy (having gone to Durmstrang Institute) had never heard of a secret chamber built by Salazar Slytherin. Tom's mother, as well, had never heard of it. It was left up to him.

Unfortunately, the gorgeous weather made Tom wish he was flying around on his broom, or practising curses in the sunshine, rather than sticking his nose through dusty old books. He heard footsteps in the grass behind him and turned around, glad for the distraction.

It was Pandora and Wolfin, his closet friends from Gryffindor. He despaired that his fellow housemates would discover how much he

enjoyed the company of these two particular lions, however much he detested the stupidity of the average Gryffindor.

'Heya, Tom,' said Wolfin, plunking his solid frame down on the grass.

'Hullo,' Tom said.

'Reading again?' Pandora wrinkled her nose at him. 'You're such a bookworm.'

'I'm doing important research,' Tom said.

'Oh, yes, Webrett's Wizarding Who's Who. Sounds fascinating,' Pandora said dryly, tossing aside a thick tome.

'You have no idea,' Tom returned.

'We wanted to see if you want to come flying,' said Wolfin. 'We're gathering up a scrimmage team on the Quidditch pitch. All houses invited. So far we've got Cornelius Nott and Olive Hornby from Slytherin, in case you're worried. And Carter from Ravenclaw, of course.'

Tom smirked. 'Olive Hornby is rubbish at flying. What's she doing, anyhow?'

Pandora giggled. 'Probably thinks her hair looks good wind-blown.'

'Like a hag's hair, more like,' said Wolfin. 'Anyway, what do you say, Tom?'

'What are the conditions? Who are the captains?' Tom never entered into an agreement without knowing the conditions.

'Me and Pandora, of course. We're choosing from a line-up by taking turns. That way it's not one house against another. Oh, and third-years and below only. Winner gets... we haven't decided what the winner gets, actually. The satisfaction of being the best, I suppose.'

'Hmm. That's not much of an incentive, Wolfin,' said Tom.

'Oh, you know you want to play,' said Pandora. 'Quit pretending like you don't.'

Tom closed his book. 'Fine. But only if I get to play Seeker.' It was true that he did want to show off his skill at Quidditch. If any Slytherin house team members were watching... it could give him an edge at try-outs next year. He brought out his wand and, one by one, Banished the books back to the library. He did so without a second thought; he started at the look on Pandora's and Wolfin's faces.

'Tom,' Pandora said, her voice awed, 'we don't learn Banishing charms until fourth year! How'd you do that?'

'Yeah, how'd you do that?' Wolfin echoed.

Tom shrugged. 'It's not hard,' he said. 'I just read the text ahead of time, that's all.'

'Do you have a time-turner?' Pandora accused. 'Is that how you find time to do all of this? Be top of the class and learn all of this extra business, too?'

'Take it easy,' said Tom. 'You're a good student too, when you apply yourself.'

Wolfin snorted. 'She never does.'

'Exactly my point,' said Tom. 'Pandora, if you spent half as much time studying as you did thinking up pranks, and pursuing pointless questions, you would be ahead of me.'

'I doubt that,' she said, though she sounded mollified. Then she brightened up. 'I do suppose it's a matter of focus.'

Tom rolled his eyes.

The impromptu Quidditch match was indeed a mix of all the houses. There were four Slytherins, two Hufflepuffs, three Ravenclaws, and five Gryffindors. For her team Pandora chose Tom first, which flattered him, but they ended up with Olive Hornby as well.

Once he was up on his broom, circling the pitch and keeping an eye on his competitor, a boy named Ashley Wynn from Ravenclaw, Tom let his muscles relax and enjoyed the wind through his hair. Every question seemed distant from so high up. Even Hogwarts Castle

rose up as though a dream in the distance. Tom tried not to think about the elusive chamber that might lurk beneath its stones. For a moment he concentrated on nothing but spotting the Golden Snitch.

While the novices below dropped the Quaffle half the time, and Olive Hornby fell off her broom, and the Keepers never did their job, Tom flew along in serene self-confidence. When he spotted the Golden Snitch about thirty minutes into the match, he sprung into action, diving forward, reaching his hand out... he would get there before Wynn, who was on the other side of the pitch... There. He had it.

The little mechanism buzzed angrily in his hand but he did not let it go. Casually he flew down toward the game. 'I've got the Snitch,' he announced, holding it up. Pandora shrieked in delight; she'd been playing Keeper and had been in the middle of an argument with Cornelius about whether he was purposely sending Bludgers her way, or whether his aim was just bad.

As they walked back to the castle, Pandora and Tom lagged behind a little, because Pandora was dancing around as though she wanted to talk to him.

'What is it?' he asked impatiently. He had wasted enough time that afternoon and wanted to get back to his books.

'You're acting funny,' she said. 'I guess I've been meaning to ask earlier... you've seemed different since Christmas. Always with your nose in a book, more than usual. And you get a weird smile on your face sometimes.'

Tom frowned at her. He hadn't realised he'd been under observation. 'I'm just happy,' he said.

'But why? What's there to be so happy about?'

'What isn't there to be happy about?' Tom joked.

'I think you're hiding something,' said Pandora. 'Please tell me? I've kept secrets for you before. I've never said a word about —' she paused and looked around '—about Nagini.'

That was true, Tom had to admit to himself. Could he play off the Gryffindor sense of loyalty and honour? If he swore Pandora to

secrecy, she would not break his confidence... on purpose, at least. There was always the danger of her saying something that gave him away without meaning to. He fell silent, mulling it over.

'Tom?'

'I'm thinking,' he snapped.

'Sorry.'

It would be nice to have someone he could talk to. He missed his mother, who understood the way things were, and he missed Casper Malfoy, who was an odd sort of friend. Having grown up with his mum as a confidante made Tom compare his home life with his life at Hogwarts... and school did not quite add up. He had a great many acquaintances, but within Slytherin House it was all power plays and status. Besides, he hadn't exactly started on the right foot there. He supposed that amongst his fellow students, Pandora was the closest friend he had, despite her being a Gryffindor. In the case of keeping secrets, that worked for him.

'Fine,' he said, 'I'll tell you, but you have to swear that you won't say a word to anyone.'

'I swear,' said Pandora, but Tom interrupted her.

'No,' he said, 'I mean a wizard's oath. Not here. We'll go somewhere else... the Astronomy Tower. It's Sunday, so there are no classes.'

'I don't want to hike all the way up those stairs,' Pandora grumbled.

'Do you want to find out or don't you?'

'Oh, fine. The Astronomy Tower. Can Wolfin come, too?'

'Absolutely not,' Tom said quickly and decisively.

'He won't tell a soul either!' Pandora said.

For Tom, it was not a matter of discussion. Wolfin Fenwick, Tom knew, was the sort of person who would follow his friends into the deepest part of hell and back again. His loyalty was staunch and unshakeable. He was so utterly predictable. On the one hand Tom

despised him for it, because he could so easily manipulate Wolfin into doing what he wanted; on the other hand, he enjoyed the boy's quality for the same reason. Predictability gave him control and Tom liked to be in control.

'Not Wolfin,' Tom said. 'Not yet, anyway. Besides, you don't even know what it is. It's actually quite mundane.'

'If you're involved, it's not mundane,' said Pandora.

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. 'Maybe not. Meet me up there after dinner. I don't want to be out past curfew.'

She agreed, and after dinner Tom did not glance at Pandora as the students filed out of the Great Hall. Instead he walked, calm and sure, up the stairs and along the corridors until he came to the quiet entrance to the tower. His feet took him up.

He was the first to arrive; Pandora came huffing and puffing onto the tower ten minutes later. 'Merlin's beard!' she exclaimed. 'Those are some stairs. My legs are too short to handle them.'

'Complainer,' said Tom.

She crossed her arms and plunked herself down on the floor, leaning her back up against the stone wall. 'So. Let's have it.'

'You really have no patience,' he said. 'You're like a bloodhound. Catch the scent of a mystery...'

'Dodging the subject!' Pandora half-shouted.

He shushed her. 'I don't want anyone else coming up here. In fact –' he walked over and cast a small locking charm on the door. It was not much, because advanced warding techniques were not taught until NEWT-level, but the charm would at least alert them if someone touched the door handle. Then, Tom brought out his wand and held out his hand; Pandora took it with cold fingers.

'Vinculum Silens,' he chanted, and a thin cord of gold light came forth from his wand, encircling their clasped hands.

'Where did you learn that?' Pandora whispered.

Tom just smiled. 'It's a bond of silence. For the telling of secrets. It will apply only to what I'm about to say, of course, and if you try to deliberately reveal the secret, you'll find yourself unable to speak of it. Some potions will undo the charm, like Veritaserum, but I doubt it will ever come to that. Besides, I trust you. It's just a precaution. Now repeat after me: I solemnly swear not to reveal what I am about to hear.'

Pandora repeated it with as serious a face as Tom had ever seen her. 'I solemnly swear not to reveal what I am about to hear.'

'Now.' Tom settled himself into a sitting position opposite Pandora. 'You're right, things have been a bit different since Christmas.'

She raised her eyebrows.

A sort of glee bloomed inside his breast. It felt good to tell someone that he was the Heir of Slytherin. He anticipated the look on Pandora's face. 'You know my father was a Muggle and my mother a pureblood witch. Well... it turns out she's a lot more than that. Her family were called the Gaunts. They were pureblood as far back as they go... and she told me something about myself that I didn't know before. It's the reason I was sorted into Slytherin House.'

Pandora looked puzzled. 'Go on,' she said.

'I —' he paused for dramatic effect, '—am the last surviving heir of Salazar Slytherin.'

The effect was what he had hoped for. Pandora stared, unblinking, her jaw becoming unhinged. Her face went pale. Several thick moments of silence passed before she stammered a question. 'H-how is it possible? Are you sure?'

'Yes,' said Tom. As he said it, a wind kicked up and whipped through their hair; it was cold and Pandora shivered. Tom did not notice. 'At least, I'm mostly sure. That's why I've been doing research. To find the hard evidence.'

'Did your mother tell you?'

'Yah, over Christmas. She said that her family, the Gaunts, were the last of them... which makes me the Heir.' He said it with unmistakeable pride in his voice. He was something special and he knew it.

Pandora peered at him. 'That explains the Parseltongue, then,' she said. 'Of course! If you're Slytherin's descendant, its also why the Sorting Hat put you there, even though your dad's a Muggle...'

Tom frowned. She'd put it together rather quickly, in fact. 'Yeah, well...'

'Oh, but this is exciting!' Pandora jumped to her feet. 'Can I help you search? I'll break into the Restricted Section if you want me to.'

It was without hesitation he gave her permission to do so. And the thing that he'd been about to reveal, the additional information about Slytherin's secret chamber... Tom decided to keep it to himself for now. Until he knew what he was dealing with, he would let Pandora believe it was a strictly academic project.

'Tom, why don't you want anyone else knowing about this?' Pandora asked as they clattered back down the Astronomy Tower stairs. 'It seems to me it's something to be proud of.'

'It is,' said Tom, 'but I want to save it for now. I want solid proof so no one can deny it. And... just trust me, Pandora. It needs to be kept quiet. Maybe next school year I'll say something.'

'It's up to you, of course, he's your ancestor... I'll keep it a secret if you tell me to.'

Tom wondered if Pandora realised how readily she obeyed his orders.

Not for the first time, Tom wished that he had an invisibility cloak. It almost curfew and he was stuck in the Slytherin dormitory, listening to Ian and Cornelius argue about that year's professional Quidditch draft. He had better things to do. The Restricted Section called to him like a siren... he'd always wanted to look through it but never had an excuse. He'd thought about going to Slughorn and explaining about his ancestry, and asking for a note to search the archives... but no, Slughorn would parade him around like a prize and Tom would never have any peace.

He rolled his eyes as Ian threatened to hex Cornelius. 'That's enough,' Tom's voice cut through their argument. 'You're both on my last nerve. Go to bed.'

They did as told. Tom allowed himself a brief surge of satisfaction. At least the Slytherins were starting to follow their instincts... and follow their natural leader.

There was one book that he suspected held the answer he was looking for. It was called '*Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*'. The library at Hogwarts did not have a copy of it, but Pandora thought they did and that it was simply in the Restricted Section. Tom hoped she was right, because he could not afford to buy a copy... it was 52 Galleons from the booksellers in Diagon Alley.

Typically, Pandora had an elaborate plan for getting into the Restricted Section. It involved a house-elf distraction, a fire on the Quidditch pitch, and allowing themselves to be locked into the library at night. Tom had vetoed the idea, knowing that simplicity worked best. They had to be flexible. So, with one full day of classes left, he and Pandora had decided they would sneak into the library just as it was closing. It was sure to be full of Ravenclaws, doing last-minute studying before the summer holidays, and no one would notice a couple second-years.

However, Tom could not go anywhere until his friends went to bed. He did not want any questions. With a final shove and exchange of insults, Avery and Nott disappeared up the dormitory stairs, and Tom closed his book and shoved it aside. He laced up his shoes quickly and, glancing back and forth to be sure no one observed him, he darted out of the door and through the labyrinthine passageways of the dungeons.

As agreed, Pandora was waiting at the bust of Agrippa on the fourth floor. She hopped back and forth on her feet; Tom decided to sneak up on her. He brought out his wand and cast Silencing charms on the soles of his shoes, then walked quickly up from behind.

'Boo!' he whispered in her right ear.

To Pandora's credit, she did not scream, but gasped loudly and whipped out her wand, pointing it at Tom's chin. Then she called him a rather nasty name.

'Tsk, tsk, watch your language,' he said.

'You are impossible,' she said. 'Come on. I'm amazed that I'm even helping you, since you're so mean.'

'I'm not mean.'

'Shhh!' They were at the library doors; looking through, they waited until Madame Grank's back was turned to speak to some Ravenclaws, and then they darted through and hid behind a large bookshelf. 'What now?' said Pandora. 'Want me to cause a distraction?'

'No...'

'Heya,' said a voice behind them.

Tom's wand was out, an unnecessary precaution in the Hogwarts library, but it was just Lawrence Carter with a stack of books in his arms.

'What are you two doing?' asked Lawrence, suspicious.

'Just a bit of research,' said Tom, at the same time as Pandora said, 'Nothing at all.'

'Yeah, right,' said Lawrence. He set the stack of books down. 'Library's going to close in ten minutes.'

'Good to see you,' said Tom dismissively. He did not need this to turn into a group effort.

'Not so fast,' said Lawrence. 'Pandora looks like she's bursting at the seams with something. What's going on?'

Tom shot Pandora a nasty look. Figures that she would give it all away. He gestured for her to be quiet, for the love of Merlin. His voice came out smooth and reassuring. 'Forgot to return our books.

Knowing the old library bat, she'll try to give us a fine. What are you doing?'

'Same. Returning these,' said Lawrence, gesturing at the pile of books. He nodded slowly. 'Well... I guess I won't see you lot until next school year. Have a good summer.'

'Cheers, mate. You too.' Tom could afford to be nice now that Lawrence's curiosity was sated and the boy was leaving.

'Phew,' said Pandora, when Lawrence was gone.

'What are you talking about?' Tom hissed. 'It was your fault he was suspicious. You need to learn to control your face a bit better.'

Pandora snorted. They did not speak further after that, because the bell sounded that the library was closing. The sound of scurrying feet toward the door disguised Tom and Pandora's movement toward the Restricted Section. They heard Madame Grank's shrill voice, admonishing students to hurry, and then the lights dimmed and died. There was the sound of jangling keys, a door slamming, a lock turning.

'Now we're locked in,' said Pandora. She sounded thrilled.

'Come on,' Tom said. 'Keep up.' He moved stealthily through the stacks, nothing but a thin boy-shaped shadow, followed by a thin girl-shaped shadow. The Restricted Section with its huge iron gate loomed in front of them. A smile spread across Tom's face as he pointed his wand at the lock. 'Alohamora,' he whispered. The lock opened for him.

'Show off,' Pandora whispered.

The Restricted Section was as interesting as he'd hoped. There were so many books on the Dark Arts that Tom was tempted to take them all home with him. 'Look,' he breathed, trailing his fingers along the books, the chains that bound them clanking in low, hushed tones. 'Moste Potente Potions...' he said, almost to the 'N' section.

'Try to restrain your dark instincts,' said Pandora, although she looked just as tempted when her gaze stopped on 'Nasty Curses, A to Z.'

'Look!' Tom said, reaching past her head. 'Here it is.' Indeed, a copy of 'Nature's Nobility' rested on the shelf. 'I wonder why it's in the Restricted Section. And how'd you know about it?'

'My brothers told me that sometimes Madame Grank will say the library doesn't have a book, even when it does. It's just because she doesn't want to go through the trouble of writing a note for this section.'

'Old hag,' Tom muttered. 'Here. Lumos.' The tip of his wand lit up so they could read the book. He could see why the book had been in the Restricted Section; it gave detailed information about several families who had students at Hogwarts. It must have been for their privacy that the book was out-of-bounds to general perusal. Tom's fingers skimmed rapidly through the index, looking for the name...

'There, Gaunt,' said Pandora, pointing.

They opened the book to page 417, as indicated, where the section on the Gaunts began. Tom scanned the paragraphs, learning a few interesting tidbits: the Gaunts traditionally intermarried with the Peverell family; they were the greatest 'blood purists' around; the Peverells were considered wizarding nobility. There was a drawing with their coat of arms. The last known members of the family were Marvolo and Siobhan Gaunt, and their children Morfin and Merope.

'That's your mum, right?' Pandora asked, as she read along with Tom.

'Yeah.' He had to admit it was more exciting to do research with Pandora. Eagerness for knowledge was better when it was shared. Of course, he knew Pandora was interested because she got to break some rules; when it came to normal knowledge such as the laws of Transfiguration, she struggled to stay motivated. Not for the first time, Tom thought she suited her given name.

The history of the Gaunt family went on for several more pages, when on page 421, Tom hit gold. In the year 1560, the only child of the Slytherin family, a woman named Belinda, married a man named Oberon Gaunt. 'Thus,' read the book, 'the families of Gaunt and Slytherin were combined, and the Gaunts carried forth the bloodline of the great wizard Salazar Slytherin. However, a tradition of having

only single children has meant the line has not expanded, and although intermarriage with appropriately pureblood cousins has preserved the purity of the Slytherin line, there are no descendants left besides those who bear the name of Gaunt.'

Tom re-read the paragraph to be sure, but it was clear: the Gaunts were the last of Slytherin's line. 'That settles it, then,' he said. 'It's true. I'm the Heir.'

Pandora looked sideways at him. 'It sounds like they were a snobby family.'

To remember the reference, he scribbled the page number of the book on his hand, and closed the large tome. 'The Gaunts were horrible, to listen to my mother talk. Obsessed with their heritage. She said that's why she didn't tell me until now.' He sat back, leaning against the old shelves. 'She didn't want me to feel burdened with having Slytherin's blood.'

'But you're a Parseltongue,' Pandora said. 'That's a clue.'

'Well, I didn't put it together until now,' Tom snapped.

'Don't bite my head off,' Pandora said, looking at her fingernails. 'So. What are you going to do now? Now that you know for sure?'

'I don't know,' Tom whispered, but he lied. He knew exactly what his next move would be. He would live out his summer, learning more, and then when he returned to Hogwarts he would begin his search for Slytherin's chamber. The muscles of his face stayed disciplined, but he could not help the smile that crept into his eyes. He would rule this place.

A/N: Some of you might be wondering why I chose to have Tom Riddle interested in Quidditch. Many stories I've read have him as a bookish type, or too absorbed in the Dark Arts to care about sport, etc. However, I see a bit of circumstantial evidence in canon that Riddle was good at Quidditch: Harry Potter is good at it. Harry's dad was a Chaser, which doesn't explain how Harry is so incredibly good as a Seeker. My explanation: Riddle/Voldemort was a good Seeker. My take, anyway, and it would have made Riddle into that total overachiever that we all know he was.

## Chapter Nine

Merope had always felt like a negative image of the world around her. When other children were having idyllic childhoods, she was in hell. When things were supposed to be perfect for her, they went belly-up. And, when she expected the worst, the best thing happened. So it was that in the summer of 1940, when the world around her was growing darker by the day, buried under the threat of the National Wizards in Germany, the life of Merope Gaunt Riddle had never felt brighter.

Part of it was her doing. She'd gotten a raise from Mr. Jigger; with so many people buying the ingredients for strengthening potions and first-aid serums, the apothecary was doing a roaring war-time trade. Merope was in the thick of it, ordering restocks of rare ingredients, anticipating the rush, and generally making herself indispensable. Jigger knew it and rewarded her accordingly. She was not a Slytherin without reason. The strength was in her, too, and oh, how it felt good to let it free.

Tom was home for the summer and she allowed him to help in the shop in exchange for an increase in his allowance. Merope never told Jigger, but occasionally she sent Tom into Knockturn Alley to spy on the competition, on the Dark potions shops, and then report back with their prices on rare items. Then Merope would undercut them. The result was that many wizards who once shopped in Knockturn Alley came to Slug and Jigger instead, because that 'shop's assistant would find what you needed.'

The best part of Merope's life, however, was the little thrill of promise she got when a fine eagle owl tapped on the window with letters for her and Tom.

She was awarded one of those happy moments on a day in mid-July when the weather was beautiful and the door of the back storeroom was open to the herb garden. The owl flew in and landed on Merope's shoulder; with manicured nails she took the rolled-up parchment from its leg and gave it a treat.

It was for the sake of the letters that Merope kept her appearance up. She liked to feel her best when opening a dispatch from Casper Malfoy.

Dear Mrs. Riddle, it said,

I trust you are well. Please accept my apologies for sending your son a carnivorous book; I did not realise the extent of the book's aggressive qualities when I purchased it in a shop in Moscow. However, judging from your last letter, Tom has learned the secret of taming the book.

I regret I will be unable to return to London until the fall; I have much business abroad and none of it can be properly explained in a letter. However, my younger brother Abraxas and his wife Veridian have settled in a house in Wiltshire; I have told them that if you call, they should receive you, and that if you need anything, they should accommodate you.

Mrs. Riddle, I also wish to confirm to you that it was your son Tom who informed me of your family's connection to Salazar Slytherin; I would not dream of invading your privacy or history by investigating it myself. Now that I do know of your descendants, however, rest assured that the secret is safe with me.

Your servant,

Casper Malfoy

Merope smiled. It was true that she'd sent off a sharply-worded letter to Casper when he said he knew that she was the second-to-last descendant of the great Slytherin; she'd thought he had somehow discovered the connection himself. However, when pressed on the matter, Tom had confessed that he'd been the one to inform Malfoy, saying that the older wizard might be able to help them someday.

Then Merope re-read the line about Casper's business abroad. A small frown creased her brow. It sounded like he was travelling, and in dangerous places. Not for the first time she wondered whose side the Malfoys were on. She'd read an editorial letter by Abraxas in the Daily Prophet that was close to open in its support of Grindelwald's pureblood policies.

She hoped that Casper was not involved with the Nationalists in Germany. He'd said last Christmas that he held no prejudice against non-pureblood wizards, but there was so much more to it than that; Merope knew that it was easier to side with the winners. And it

looked like Grindelwald's forces were winning. Merope paid attention to the Muggle world, too, since she occasionally ventured into Muggle London to buy staples like flour, as they were cheaper there. She'd heard the stories about refugees from the continent. She'd heard the rumours about entire groups being sent to camps. Even the Daily Prophet had printed a story accusing Grindelwald's Dark wizards of keeping legions of Muggle slave workers.

From outside, she could hear the drone of Muggle aeroplanes as they danced and stung each other in the skies above London. It was a dark time. Yet, between Merope's fingers, Casper Malfoy's letter was a promise that she was not ignored. Her attraction grew every day, not so much to him but to the idea of him, a man powerful in her world, a man who could take care of things.

She tucked the letter into a pocket and refocused her attention on helping a group of Hogwarts students, Ravenclaws from the looks of them. After years of working in the apothecary, Merope was getting quite good at sorting students based on how they acted, and only Ravenclaws bought potions supplies prior to the week before school. Amongst their giggles and whispers, she thought she heard her son's name.

When Tom left King's Cross for his third year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the situation was different at the train station. As he and his mother disembarked from their customary Muggle taxi, trunk in tow and Tom outfitted with school robes that fit his fast-growing frame, the Muggle section of King's Cross was grim with purpose.

Companies of soldiers waited on the platform, fresh pink faces above sombre brown uniforms, rifles held with unsure hands. Some of them looked barely older than Tom himself. His mother gripped his shoulder as they scurried through the crowd, as though she were afraid he would join the army if she left him alone. A ridiculous thought, that; Tom would never risk his life for Muggles. He probably wouldn't even risk his life for wizards.

He was a king, not a pawn.

When they disappeared through the brick wall onto Platform 9¾, a similar military sight greeted them: groups of Aurors clad in red robes patrolled the area, checking under the train and waving Dark detectors over trunks.

'What's happening?' Merope asked.

'Probably looking for Grindelwald. Afraid he's smuggled himself to Hogwarts,' said Tom. He was hoping they did not open his trunk and find Nagini in there. She might attack if provoked.

Merope shook her head. 'You be careful this term.'

'I always am,' Tom said. 'I'm a model student, mother.'

'I know you are,' she said, undoubtedly thinking of his grades, and ignorant of the other things Tom got up to.

'Riddle!' a voice called. He turned and saw a group of Slytherins standing behind him; the Black cousins, Nott, Avery, and that Russian kid, Antonin Dolohov, who was in the year below them.

'Hello,' Tom inclined his head. He glanced at his mother.

'Oh, go on then,' she said, kissing him on the top of the head.

He wrested himself from her embrace before he could be further embarrassed. 'Have a nice summer?' he asked, walking tall toward the crowd of snakes. 'Hope you haven't caught the Squib disease, Ian,' he said to Avery, knowing that the boy had spent the summer with his aunt and uncle and his cousin, who was shamefully a Squib.

The others laughed and Avery turned red. 'Come on,' said Tom. 'Let's get a compartment on the train.'

They followed his direction. The Black girls kept giggling whenever Tom looked at them and he found it annoying; he wondered if they had some practical joke in mind. No one tricked Tom Riddle. He hoped that Lucretia and Walburga were aware of it.

The Slytherins muscled and shoved their way onto the train, ejecting a couple first-years out of their favourite compartment. Tom relaxed into his window seat, putting his feet up on the cushion across from him. He waved to his mother, who stood on the platform by herself, playing with a handkerchief in her restless hands. A peculiar feeling came over him as the train pulled out of the station; reality wavered in front of his eyes for a moment and it was almost like his mother

was in his imagination... as though she was in danger. Things could be snatched away fast.

He blinked when the bright daylight dazzled his eyes as the Hogwarts Express burst out of the covered section of the train tracks. When the snack trolley came by, Walburga Black made a show of buying sweets for everyone, including Tom, for whom she held out a hand full of Chocolate Frogs. He took one without thanking her, because she was the one who should be honoured by his notice of her. The card was of the Dark witch Morgana le Fay; he already had three of Morgana.

He tossed the card on the seat. 'Now listen here,' he said. The others in the compartment looked up at the sound of his voice. 'Last year Slytherin came in third place for the house cup. I don't see how that should happen again.'

'It's the sixth- and seventh-years,' complained Lucretia. 'They don't do anything right.'

'No, it's the second-years,' said Avery. 'The class below us is worthless.'

'Hey!' squeaked Antonin Dolohov.

'Oh, you're all right, Dolly,' said Avery. 'But you have to admit, the rest of you lot are rubbish. That's why you're sitting with us.'

An angry blush worked over Dolohov's thin face, but he did not disagree.

'Who's trying out for Quidditch?' Tom asked.

'Me!' said Cornelius Nott. 'I'm trying out for Seeker.'

Tom smirked. Nott didn't stand a chance. 'Anyone else?'

'I'm going to be a Beater,' said Avery with confidence.

'You better try for Chaser,' said Tom. 'They'll never let a little third-year be a Beater. And there's an opening there.'

'Yeah, well, what about you?'

'I'll be the Seeker. Sorry, Cornelius.' Tom leaned back against the seat, already impatient with the subject he'd brought up. It didn't matter, Quidditch. Not really. Not when he had other extracurricular activities in mind for the school year... like searching for the Chamber of Secrets.

He had written to Casper Malfoy in the first week of summer, explaining his genealogical research and the mention of a chamber built by Salazar Slytherin within Hogwarts Castle. He'd also scoured the bookstores in Knockturn Alley, looking for something helpful, and spoken to several dodgy characters about Slytherin's history. All were dead ends, except for that shopkeeper, Caractacus Burke, who was lying to Tom when he said he knew nothing about Slytherin. It was a mystery that Tom had not had the chance to solve, unfortunately; his mother and Mr. Jigger kept him busy in the apothecary and he'd learnt to brew some very nasty poisons, which was enjoyable.

Outside their compartment in the corridor of the train, he heard loud voices and looked up in annoyance. A group of Gryffindor girls was passing by, Pandora Piper among them; she did not acknowledge Tom. Then Walburga Black got up from her seat.

'Term hasn't started yet,' she said in her crackly voice that seemed too old for a girl of fourteen. 'No one to give me detention if I hex them.'

'Do it!' Lucretia encouraged her.

'Yeah!' echoed Dolohov, who jumped forward eagerly in his seat.

'Let's see Dolly do it,' said Tom. He knew the boy did not know any good hexes. Plus, an uncomfortable feeling of protectiveness arose within him at the idea of Pandora getting hexed; he was not sure why. He felt it had to do with her keeping of his secrets. If the Slytherins got on Pandora's bad side, she might take it out on him, Tom, and tell the world what she'd sworn to keep quiet...

'No,' whined Walburga. 'My cousin Orion taught me this one over the summer. It's really good.'

'That's not all he taught you,' Lucretia snorted.

'Shut up,' Walburga snapped. 'Watch this.' She flung open the compartment door and stepped outside, pointed her wand at the backs of the Gryffindors, and spoke the incantation for the colour-change charm.

It was not Pandora but one of her friends whose hair was turned bright green. The Slytherins howled with laughter, except for Tom who just grinned. The others stood up to see the damage but he stayed lounged in his seat. He'd seen the effects of the colour-changing charm and it was not enough to motivate him to move. The sun felt nice on his arms and face.

The Gryffindors shouted in protest; Tom heard Pandora yell a boil curse that just missed Walburga as the girl darted back into the Slytherin compartment. Walburga's pale face was red with laughter.

'That was brilliant,' said Cornelius.

'Well done, Wally,' said Tom.

'Thanks, Tom,' said Walburga.

The smile on his face sputtered a little when Pandora glared into the compartment, but Dolohov scrambled up and closed the curtain in her face, and Tom tried to enjoy the rest of the way to Hogwarts.

The meals at Hogwarts were better than Tom remembered. He liked his mother's cooking best, of course, but he had to admit the house-elves' Yorkshire pudding was perfect. It was two weeks into the school term when, on a velvet-dark evening during dinner, a familiar post-owl flew into the Great Hall and swooped down to Tom.

'Odd,' he said aloud, looking at the apothecary owl. It was a letter from his mother.

Dearest Tom, she wrote.

I hesitated to write to you because I thought it would end. I'm not sure if you've been reading the papers – the Muggles have gone mad. Their aeroplanes fly every night above London, dropping bombs. The noise is terrible. The worst of it is east of us, in the industrial centre of the city, I suppose... but a stray bomb from a German plane hit near Covent Garden. The Ministry wizards have

put up stronger wards because they're not sure if Diagon Alley is safe from a direct hit.

They're calling it the Blitz here. It's the German Muggles fighting the British Muggles, but I feel sure there are other things involved. Last night I watched out the window; I counted over a hundred of the big contraptions. Their bellies release row after row of the exploding bombs.

I just want you to know that I am safe as long as I am in Diagon Alley and I will not be going into Muggle London anymore. It's simply too dangerous. So no matter what you hear from your fellow students, don't be afraid. If it gets too bad I'll find some way to leave the city.

Love and kisses,

Mum

P.S. I've enclosed a bit of spending money for you, since you will be able to visit Hogsmeade this year.

Tom frowned as he let the five Galleon coins fall into his hand. He did not like the sounds of it. He wished there were a way for his mother to leave London, perhaps come up to Hogsmeade, or stay in the countryside.

'Who's that from?' asked Olive Hornby, sitting across the table from him.

He shook his head. He did not care for Olive, and he especially did not care for the way she simpered all over him... he had no interest in girlfriends. Olive was useful in her way; occasionally he would toss her a bit of attention and then withdraw it again, just to keep her hanging. 'It's nothing,' he said. 'Hey, Lestrange. Let's go out to the Quidditch pitch tonight.'

'A'right,' said Raoul Lestrange. 'I'll bring the brooms.'

Tom nodded. He did not have his own broom, but Lestrange had two: last year's Comet 99 model, and this year's Comet 100. Tom used the 100.

He left his dessert and walked out of the Great Hall, followed by three or four friends. As he did, he glanced over to the Gryffindor table and spotted a blond head of hair from the back. Tom had not spoken to Pandora yet this term aside from 'hellos' in class. Something nudged at him to reconfirm her loyalty soon, for she knew his secret heritage... but something held him back from seeking her out. Perhaps it was impossible to try to be friends with a Gryffindor.

Merope had always hated loud noises. They made her jump, ever since she was a small girl and she would hear the front door slam and her father shout. Noises meant that she had dropped something out of fear and clumsiness, or that she'd done something wrong. Loud was her father's temper. Loud was the clunking of outside feet as Merope hid in the dark closet. Loud was Morfin's braying laugh, his breathing in the long hellish midnights of her childhood home.

So the turn of events in London made her nervous. She could not sleep at night nor, she thought, could anyone else in the city, for the air-raid sirens would begin and then came the low drone of aeroplanes overhead and then the whistle of bombs as they fell. It seemed to get worse, never better.

Jigger had cast Imperturbable charms in the shop, but they did not extend to Merope's flat above. At night, during the worst of the bombing, Merope would sit at the window, wishing that Tom was there with her to give comfort. She would watch to the east as the city burned, gripping a mug of tea in her hand, drinking in slow, careful sips. Sometimes an explosion would hit close by and Merope would jump like a startled cat. She thought she would get used to it, but she never did.

She brought out the two letters that Tom had sent her thus far in the school year. Both expressed concern over her safety and he told her not to venture into Muggle London... Merope trusted her son's advice, although she would not have left the wizarding world anyway. It made her happy, as well, that Tom seemed to be quite popular at Hogwarts. He was the top of his class and would be playing for the house Quidditch team...

'Every time the bell rings, a phoenix grows new wings!' The doorbell sang out softly.

Merope turned from her watching-place at the window. Who could that be at ten-thirty on a Wednesday night? She looked into the mirror and fluffed up her curled hair, and tied her nightdress more tightly about her. With a nervous eye she peered through the peephole in the door.

She gasped. It was Casper Malfoy, standing at the top of the stairs, his tall frame filling all available space.

Oh, he could not see her like this, in her nightdress... how humiliating... but she could not leave a man like him waiting, either. With a deep, shaking breath she opened the door. Her throat choked over her greeting.

'Mrs. Riddle,' said Casper, bowing. 'Good evening. I apologise for the disturbance.'

'I—er—it's all right,' she managed to stammer out. She stood there as though she'd been Petrified.

'May I come in?'

'Oh, yes, yes, of course...' She pulled the door open wider to admit him. A burning rush of shame floated to her cheeks at the smallness of her flat, the worn furniture, the soot-smudged windows. Ducking her head, she stood aside as Casper stepped forward.

'You must be wondering why I'm here,' he said, the corner of his thin mouth quirking a little.

'Y-yes, sir, I am.'

'Oh, don't call me sir,' said Casper. 'I would prefer if you thought of me as a friend.'

'I can do that, I suppose,' she said, forcing her own mouth to smile a little. How could he not hear the pounding of her heart? But over the Blitzkrieg raging outside, she understood how the sound might be mistaken for bombs.

'Good,' he said. He sat down on the sofa as though to make himself at home. It was then that Merope remembered her manners.

'Would you like some tea?' she asked.

'Please,' he said.

She did not trust her wand hand to be steady if she conjured a teapot, so instead she turned her back and worked at the stove to prepare a tea service. She could feel Casper's eyes on her as she floated the tray towards the sitting area. 'We only have black tea, I'm sorry,' she said. 'Rations, you know. I usually buy tea from a Muggle shop – believe it or not – because they carry Assam tea, and with the exchange rate we save several Sickles... not that that matters, of course,' she blurted, recalling that she was speaking to one of the world's richest wizards.

'This is fine,' said Casper, taking a cup by the handle.

Because he was in her flat, his face seemed more up-close than in their previous few meetings. Small, cold eyes in a pale, pointed face... Merope wondered if, were he not wealthy, she would find him attractive at all... but of course she would. It was because he paid attention to her and her son in a way that was flattering. Self-consciously she played with her hands.

'How is Tom?' Casper asked. 'Enjoying school?'

'Oh, yes,' said Merope, grateful for a subject on which she could expand. 'He's the top of his class. All the professors say so.' She told Casper about her son's various successes at school, and that he'd made Seeker on the house Quidditch team. Unaware of the fondness in her own voice, the softening of her eyes, the glow of pride, she wondered how Casper could stare at her for so long.

'You are devoted to your son,' said Casper.

'I suppose I am,' Merope said. A giggle bubbled up from nowhere and she clamped down on her jaw to keep it from escaping. In the presence of this Malfoy, she felt a teensy bit hysterical.

'He will be a great wizard,' Casper mused, not for the first time.

'I hope he will be a good one, too,' said Merope, echoing the words of Professor Dumbledore. Thinking about Tom's future she sometimes got flashes of memory, of that odd vision of childbed,

and most of the time she dismissed it as the raving mind of a delirious pregnant woman... except when people talked about how powerful Tom was. What a great wizard he would become. The world measured greatness by standards beyond Merope's grasp: control, beauty, charm, power, intelligence. It frightened her how many such blessings belonged to her son; it was a tremendous burden. Just like the 'greatness' of Slytherin's line was a burden.

'I'm sorry,' said Merope. 'Why are you here?' She hoped she did not sound too rude.

Casper gave her a thin but good-natured smile that crinkled his face. 'I was – as you say – in the neighbourhood. I remembered that you work here and I thought I would stop to tell you hello. As a friend.'

'Oh,' Merope murmured faintly. 'All right, then.'

'I'm not intruding?'

'No!' she blurted. 'No, of course not, I'm very glad to see you. It's just that... I don't have friends. I'm not used to it.' She gave what she hoped was a self-deprecating laugh that stopped shy of being pathetic.

'I think many people do not understand you,' said Casper in that intriguing accent of his.

It sounded so flattering coming from him. Merope smiled. 'Perhaps,' she said primly, sipping her tea. It had gone cold so she automatically picked up her wand from the table and tapped the teacup, reheating the liquid... then smiled wider. She'd just done magic, easy as that, in front of Malfoy. The smile turned into an almost-smirk as she thought about how her father would think of her now, hosting one of the wizarding world's richest men, come by to see her.

'You are an interesting woman,' said Casper. There was a look in his eye that Merope could have sworn was more-than-friendly interest; it was almost as though his icy blue eyes were instead dark brown and gazing at her with potion-induced admiration. However, Casper Malfoy's tea was not augmented... He'd drunk it so trusting of her... She could do it again, she'd done it once... Merope shook her thoughts from that path. For once she prayed that this man might

like her on her own worth, however low that might be.

'Are in London for very long?' Merope asked, attempting to deflect the attention away from her interesting nature.

'In and out,' said Casper. 'Business. I must visit my brother, as well – at his country house. He is refurbishing it.'

'I think I saw that in the paper,' said Merope. She read the society column of the Daily Prophet with avid curiosity but did not want to admit it outright.

'Abraxas... has different views than I do. I am not approving of the way events are turning in Europe; I think war is bad for business. My brother believes otherwise. It is good I am head of the family, yes?'

'Yes,' agreed Merope. Politics were not something she liked to discuss, but she was prepared to go along with whatever Casper said, and she thought it was lucky he was head of the family. The Dark Arts made her think about her father (cursing) and her brother (heavy) and her ex-husband with vacant, adoring eyes. 'I cannot understand why Dark magic should be used like that. There must be a better way.'

'I believe in the Dark Art of commerce,' said Casper. 'Others might be bought out, or sell their businesses, but the decisions are free. No one is killed and forced. It is a ruthless world, but not brutal... do you understand what I mean?'

'Oh, yes,' Merope nodded. 'I do. In business, there are rivalries and battles and takeovers, but it is all in the realm of money. Not lives. It's a better way to do things; there are not necessarily losers in business.'

'Right!' Casper grinned at her, and she saw a flash of uneven but very white teeth. 'No losers.'

'I think you are very good at business,' said Merope admiringly.

'I am good,' admitted Casper.

'The best?'

'Not just at business,' Casper said.

'At life,' Merope said, and discovered that she was grinning too.

'I know what will make me happy. I try to pay attention to what makes others happy, too. That is the key.'

'Could you tell what makes me happy?' Merope asked, and glanced at him from beneath her eyelashes.

She realised that they were now flirting, and nothing could have prepared her for it, and it gave her a glow for several days thereafter.

## Chapter Ten

The Slytherin Quidditch team won their first match against Hufflepuff and their second, against Gryffindor. Both victories were thanks to Tom's Seeking abilities. Some of the spectators began to complain that they got all dressed up to watch Quidditch and then the match was over in fifteen minutes. It also meant that the after-game parties were all about Tom Riddle. He was plied with sweets, attention, praise, and flattery, beginning with Professor Slughorn and extending down to every little first-year.

The one-eighty-degree reversal in the opinions of his fellow Slytherins was all on the surface, in Tom's view. He knew it irked the children of the old families that he, a half-blood, was so good at everything. Snakes were loyal to one another, but they were also jealous by nature. He should know; the other week Nagini had accused him of 'consorting' with a garden snake he'd met near the lake. He wondered when would be the right time to reveal his true heritage.

Not yet, said the voice of caution. Wait until you really need it.

It reminded him that he had to speak with Pandora Piper. He wanted to make sure she was still in line. The loss of the Gryffindor Quidditch team would not have endeared her any further to Slytherin; Tom was a little bit sorry that house lines divided them more and more. He enjoyed talking pro Quidditch with Lawrence Carter, and he missed being in on the practical joke planning sessions of Pandora and Wolfin.

Wondering if Pandora would be in the library (she only studied hard when she was angry about something), Tom tried to extricate himself from the group of laughing, celebrating Slytherins, but they would have none of it.

'You've always got your nose in a book, Riddle,' said Lestrange. 'It's not natural.'

'I can hardly rely on some of these incompetents they call teachers,' said Tom. 'Dumbledore, for instance. He's so prejudiced against our house. I don't know how he manages to teach us anything.'

'Yeah!' echoed Avery. 'He took points from me just because I was slow to transfigure that bloody teapot into a bloody tortoise. Who cares if the stupid thing whistled?'

'To be fair, tortoises aren't supposed to whistle,' said Tom.

'Yeah, but ten points off? That old codger is a right –'

'Shhh, it's Sluggy,' Olive Hornby nudged Avery to change the subject as their Head of House walked by, holding a glass of mead and chortling.

'So Mum and Dad have left London,' said Walburga, examining her fingernails. 'Can't stand the noise anymore, they said. Dirty stupid Muggles.'

'Yeah, they closed up the house,' Lucretia added in her chirpy voice. 'But it wasn't just the noise... it's not safe anymore, they say...'

'Oh, what a load of rubbish,' snapped Walburga. 'As if the Muggles could hurt us.'

'Actually, the Ministry's had to put special wards up around Diagon Alley,' said Tom, quoting his mother on the subject. 'They're afraid a direct hit from the Germans might get through the magic. Nowhere in the city is safe anymore.'

'Rubbish,' Walburga repeated.

Tom repressed a hot flame of annoyance. Stupid girl. She did not understand anything, and he bet that her parents in their fine London house hadn't a clue what was going on, either. 'You're ignorant,' he said in a quiet voice. 'If the German Muggles take over the English Muggle government, what do you think will happen? It's not isolated from us, you know. The Dark Lord Grindelwald is behind it.'

'My father says Grindelwald has the right idea,' said Walburga. 'He doesn't tolerate Muggles and mudbloods. His ideas may be radical but at least someone's doing something about the poisoning of our bloodlines.'

Tom raised his eyebrows. The conversation was dangerously close to turning personal. 'An interesting theory,' he said to Walburga, 'but I suggest you find your own opinions instead of just spouting what your father says. It doesn't speak too highly of your intelligence.' He drained the remainder of his butterbeer and set it down on the table with a loud thud. 'Excuse me.'

As he walked away, he heard Cornelius say, 'Wally, you dumb bird, don't make him upset! He's the Seeker...'

At least it gave Tom the excuse to leave the Slytherin common room. The noise was giving him a headache. His feet took him toward the library along well-known stone corridors. He was occupied by pleasanter thoughts by the time he walked through the library doors... thoughts about his little research project. He already knew the text he would look at first, for it was one of his favourites: *Hogwarts, A History*. Someone had checked it out for several weeks and Madame Grank had just notified him that it was back in the library.

He waved to Lawrence Carter, who was at a table with several other swotting Ravenclaws, and sat down to an hour of reading. With each word his mind was soothed. He was above them all. He was the last heir of the Slytherin line. And the words on the page sang to him, a sweet song, full of promise, a siren to his inadequacies. Defense would soon become unnecessary. He would have a monster all his own...

The text was mostly worthless, but not quite. A mere mention on page 716 sent a glittering spike of excitement into Tom's heart: 'It was rumoured that Slytherin, during the building of the castle, had constructed a mysterious chamber somewhere in the building to house a creature of his persuasion. Dubbed the Chamber of Secrets, it is now largely acknowledged to be a myth started by Rowena Ravenclaw.'

A smile tickled the corners of his mouth. He did not think it was a myth. He thought the Chamber of Secrets existed, and he would find it.

'Well done, ten points to Gryffindor,' said Professor Dumbledore as Pandora successfully transfigured a goblet into a gopher. Their Transfiguration practical was proving difficult for many of the students and the blonde girl had been the first to do it.

The Slytherin students squirmed in their seats at the award to the rival house. It did seem that Dumbledore gave points more often to his own lions. Narrowing his eyes, Tom watched Pandora from across the room. He did not know her to be above average in Transfiguration class and wondered if something had prompted her to study harder. He made up his mind to speak to her after class. Then, unwilling to be one-upped by a Gryffindor, he regarded the goblet on his own desk. He had not even tried anything on it yet.

'Watch this,' he hissed to Lestrange.

Tom waved his wand and the goblet was a perfect brown gopher, sitting fat and fury on Tom's desk. 'How boring,' he said. He waved his wand again. The gopher squealed once as it turned into a monkey. The monkey had round brown eyes and soft white hair. 'That's better,' said Tom.

His Slytherin friends stared in awe. Animal-to-animal transfigurations were above OWL level. Tom caught Pandora's eye; she raised an eyebrow at him and turned her head away.

'What's this?' said Dumbledore mildly. 'My goodness, Tom. That was beyond the required assignment.'

'Yes, sir.' Behind Tom, the Slytherins snickered and elbowed each other, as if they could take some credit.

'A goblet into a gopher into a monkey,' said Dumbledore, stroking his beard. 'I am tempted to award points to Slytherin... that is quite a feat. However, compound Transfiguration is one of the more dangerous varieties of magic... it should not be used as an opportunity for showing off.'

'Yes, sir?' Tom said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows.

'I had no intention of that, sir,' said Tom. 'I merely wanted to see if it could be done. You wouldn't fault me for curiosity, would you, sir?'

A faint smile worked beneath Dumbledore's auburn beard. 'No, of course not,' he said understandingly. 'Twenty points to Slytherin. The rest of you please concentrate on gophers, not monkeys, and set to work, now.'

Tom noticed that Dumbledore kept watching him out of the corner of his eye for the remainder of class. When the bell rang he gathered his notebook quickly and dashed out of the room ahead of Pandora. Leaning up against the stone wall, he watched his fellow students file out of the classroom, finally spotting Pandora's golden head amongst the crowd. He called her name.

'Hi, Tom,' she said, a bit coolly.

'Want to go to the library for awhile?'

'Not especially,' she said. 'I've been studying a lot. I've had enough. It's a Friday afternoon.'

They set off walking down the corridor. Classes were out for the weekend; the first Hogsmeade weekend was the next day. 'What are you doing tomorrow?' Tom asked.

'Going to Hogsmeade.'

'Well, yeah...'

'Listen, Tom, do you have something to say to me?'

'Geez!' he said. 'What's eating you, Pandora?'

She pouted. 'Just your stupid fellow Slytherins keep trying to hex me and my friends.'

'I'm sorry,' Tom said. 'But I can hardly help that. Don't take it out on me.'

'Oh, you think I don't know you encourage them? They practically worship the ground you walk on. If you told them to stop, they'd stop. I know what you're like, Tom Riddle!'

He rolled his eyes. 'Look, if I said, 'Stop hexing the Gryffindors,' do you think they'd give a rat's tail? They'd just accuse me of sympathy toward Muggle-lovers.'

'Surely not with your... background,' Pandora said. It was to her credit that she said her last in a low whisper.

'I haven't said anything,' Tom mumbled.

'What?' A louder outburst. 'I'd have thought with your way of showing off, they would be calling you —'

'Shhh!' he implored her. 'Let's take a walk. The courtyard looks nice right now.' He veered off toward the courtyard at a quick pace, followed by Pandora. The sun was October-warm and fallen leaves skittered across the stone cobbles. Tom sat down on a stone bench with a view toward the fountain. A sulking Pandora sat next to him; not for the first time, Tom felt a tingle of irritation at Albus Dumbledore. He really did favour the Gryffindors. And how dare he accuse Tom of showing off?

'I've been wanting to talk to you,' Tom said in a straight, calm voice. He somehow knew which tone to use to get his way. It had always worked wonders on his mother and the adults around whom he'd spent his childhood.

'Yeah?' Pandora said. 'What, to make sure I haven't spilled your little secret?'

Tom frowned.

'Well, I haven't.'

'I knew I could trust you, Pandora!' Tom said.

'Hmph,' she said, but seemed less annoyed with him. 'You really haven't told the other Slytherins?'

'No...' he said. 'Not yet, anyway.'

She nodded. 'All right, fine. I'm glad to talk to you, because I found out something you might be interested in. I checked out a book called *Hogwarts: a History* just to learn more about the Founders.'

'That was you!' Tom accused, but he was smiling. 'I was on the waiting list for weeks!'

'Ha! Riddle foiled at last in his plans!' Pandora laughed. 'So I guess you already know what I found.'

He sobered and glanced around to be sure no one was listening. Other than a group of first-years shoving each other around on the other side of the courtyard, they were alone. 'Page 716. It mentions something called the Chamber of Secrets.'

'You memorised the page number? You need your head checked,' said Pandora.

'Right, but the Chamber of Secrets,' Tom prompted.

'I read that, too. But do you think it's real? It could be just a myth.'

'It's real,' said Tom. 'I heard Walburga Black telling the story. Supposedly there's a monster down there that can only be controlled by the Heir of Slytherin.'

'But if there is a monster, it's probably dead by now,' said Pandora. 'It's been nearly a thousand years. Too bad. It would be fun to have a monster as a pet. We have a first-year who's obsessed with monsters... he brought ashwinders into the common room as pets. He's a nutter.'

Tom shrugged. He had no time to worry about the strange habits of Gryffindors. 'I suppose I'll keep searching the library for information,' he said. 'There must be something in there.'

Pandora looked at him sideways. A breeze swept through the courtyard, blowing her hair across her face, and she brushed it aside. 'The library. Yeah, right. Come on, Tom. If you won't be searching the dungeons for the Chamber of Secrets itself, then... then I'll eat my hat!'

'You're not wearing a hat,' he pointed out.

'Yes, well, I can wear one for the occasion,' she said. 'Let me help you look? Please?'

'No.'

'Pretty please? I'll follow you around. I'll stalk you. I want to see it.'

Tom let out a sigh. He was beginning to regret ever telling Pandora about being the Heir of Slytherin. She was insufferably annoying sometimes. But back in second year, he'd not been quite as confident amongst his Slytherin classmates, and had felt the need to tell his Gryffindor friend. Now the divide between them was widened. Growing up left little room for unconventional loyalties.

'No one else can know about this, Pandora,' Tom said seriously. 'Same as the rest. Not Wolfin, not any of your little friends, no one. If you say a peep...' he trailed off into silence, hoping she would imagine a variety of nasty results for herself if she crossed him.

'I can keep a secret,' she huffed.

'Fine. We'll begin the search on Halloween. And I have Quidditch practise.' He flashed a grin at her. 'Have to get in shape to beat Ravenclaw next weekend.'

'I won't be rooting for you,' she said. 'I've already pledged my loyalty to Carter! In Quidditch, Tom,' she said, seeing him narrow his eyes. She smirked. 'See you in Hogsmeade tomorrow. I'll be stocking up on the tools of my trade at Zonko's.'

'Good luck with that,' he said. He pointed a finger at her. 'Halloween.'

'Halloween!'

Tom had never been to Hogsmeade village. Despite having grown up in the wizarding world, there had never been a reason for him to see the place, and besides his mother did not know how to Apparate. She was embarrassed about this, and also about the fact that they had to use the public Floo network because they did not have a connected fireplace in their flat. Thus, Tom was well-travelled in Diagon Alley and in Muggle London, but nowhere else.

It was a novelty to see Britain's only all-wizarding village. It was more of a hamlet in Tom's opinion: one high street with several side

alleys and streets branching off of it. A smattering of cottages hovered along the outskirts. The shops clustered together with stone walls and peaked roofs. On the first Hogsmeade weekend of the school year, the village was packed with Hogwarts students, banded together in large, laughing groups.

Tom had handed over his permission slip from his mother, stating he could visit Hogsmeade, and he was the de facto leader of the Slytherin third-year expedition. 'We'll go to Honeydukes' first,' Tom announced. 'I want some fudge.' He always acted as though he had money to burn. Most of the time, he was able to surreptitiously attach his purchases onto one of his schoolmates, usually Cornelius Nott or Leonidas Lestrange.

With his Slytherin crowd at his heels, Tom walked into Honeydukes', taking a deep breath of sweet-scented air. Toffee, chocolate, lemon, strawberry, mint, caramel... a million marvellous scents layered one on top of the other. He smiled. He'd always had an extraordinary sense of smell. Most of the time he resented it, because most human odours were not really worth the sense... except now, when he could almost taste the air and it was sweet indeed.

'Let's get some of those,' Tom said, pointing at a jar of Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans. He smirked as Nott dashed forward with a paper bag to put them in. 'And those,' he nodded at the sugar quills. Nott, distracted when Antonin Dolohov got his head dunked under the chocolate fountain, did not even notice when Tom gingerly added a half-pound of fudge in the bag.

Out the corner of his eye, Tom detected a quick motion to his left. Glancing over, he saw Scottie Mulciber swipe a couple of Chocolate Frogs and put them in his pocket. Tom narrowed his eyes. It did not surprise him that Mulciber was a thief. Had the boy not tried to bully Tom out of his money all those years ago on Diagon Alley? Quietly, Tom stepped up behind Mulciber. 'Going to pay for those, Scottie?'

Mulciber stiffened and turned to face Tom. Guilt was written in his eyes, guilt and defiance. 'So what? You gonna tell on me?'

'No,' said Tom slowly, 'but keep in mind that I know. I would hate to see you expelled for moral misconduct.' Tom knew that if he went to old Dumbledore with it, Mulciber would be suspended at the least.

Hogwarts' staff were always going on about maintaining good 'relations' with the Hogsmeade townspeople and shop owners.

After the sweet shop, Tom was tempted to go to Zonko's, but he held his tongue as he saw Pandora with a group of rowdy Gryffindors. They pushed and shoved each other in their eagerness to get into the shop. Tom shook his head in distaste. Gryffindors were so boorish. 'Let's go the Hog's Head.'

'I don't think underage wizards are allowed in there,' said Leo Lestrange. 'Too bad. I could have some Firewhiskey.'

'They wouldn't serve that to you,' Tom said, rolling his eyes. 'You're going to grow up to be an alcoholic. You'll be fat like Slughorn.'

'I won't!' Lestrange protested. 'Three Broomsticks, then.'

'Fine,' said Tom, bored with Hogsmeade already. It was like Diagon Alley, except smaller and with less interesting inhabitants.

The Three Broomsticks was even more crowded than the street. Tom and his half-dozen Slytherin friends had to stand and wait for a table. It was most annoying. He saw a prime wooden booth in the corner occupied by third-year Hufflepuffs. They had finished their butterbeers and loitered at the table, empty glasses in front of them. Tom got an idea. 'Wait here,' he said.

Squeezing through the crowd, he approached the Hufflepuffs. He was glad that he was so tall because it made him more intimidating. 'You're done here, please,' he said to them. With blinking, round, stupid faces, they looked back at him. 'You heard me!' Tom said. 'Scram.'

'He can't do that,' whined a girl with wire-rim glasses. 'We've a right to sit here same as you.'

'He threatened to bar you from coming back,' Tom said, knitting his eyebrows in feigned concern. 'Sorry. I'm just the messenger. Old Mr. Rosmerta doesn't like crowds and you're taking up space.' He raised his hands but did not break stares with the students.

The Hufflepuffs were finished, anyway. This was what one of the boys grumbled as they vacated the booth and Tom waved his friends over.

'You're a legend, Riddle!' said Avery appreciatively as they squeezed into the warm wooden booth. 'What'd you do, threaten to hex them?'

'I have better methods,' said Tom. 'Mulciber, go get us some butterbeers.'

From across the room, a group of fourth- and fifth-year Slytherin girls waved at Tom and giggled into their hands. He looked away.

'They fancy you,' said Nott, wrinkling his nose as though it were a disease.

'Surprises you, does it?' Tom asked. He was just teasing, really; he could care less if girls 'fancied' him. He had far more important things to do than worry about girls. He'd had the occasional odd twinge of feeling at the thought of being alone with a girl, but those feelings were usually in his dreams, and Tom never set much store by dreams. Dream interpretation in Divination class was dumb enough without doing it in his spare time.

'I don't like girls,' said Nott. 'My little sister is such an obnoxious brat. And she's a girl.'

'You don't say,' said Tom.

'She always blames stuff on me. Mum just thinks she's so perfect. Psh.'

'Druella Rosier gave me a flower the other day,' Antonin Dolohov squeaked. His voice was still the soprano of a boy.

'Oooh, bully you,' Tom mocked. He did it because he enjoyed the flush of embarrassment on Dolly's face. 'Did she give you a kiss, too?'

'No,' Dolohov scowled. 'Ew! I would never kiss a girl!' he declared, to the laughter of the other boys.

Mulciber returned with an armful of butterbeers and the rest of the first visit to Hogsmeade passed in pleasantries.

Hogwarts Castle, Tom decided, was far too large for its own good. His feet hurt from walking. Nagini slithered along next to him; she kept whining about how her scales were cold and why did she have to come with Tom, anyway?

'Because I told you to,' he hissed back at her. 'Now pipe down.'

An annoyed whistle came from her mouth, but no further comments.

As Tom walked, he munched on a bag of Cockroach Clusters. It was Halloween, the night with a late curfew, and most of his fellow students were still gorging themselves on sweets in the Great Hall. He'd taken great fistfuls of his favourite candy, as well as an entire treacle tart, and put the stash in his book bag. It made the cold corridors seem friendlier.

A wonderful opportunity, Halloween; the castle spirits were at the annual Death-Day Party of Gryffindor's pompous house ghost, and the teachers and students were busy rotting their teeth on toffee. Tom, meanwhile, was beginning his search. He was simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic. He felt that his heritage would lead him straight to the Chamber of Secrets and half-expected to find it that very night. However, he also realised that the huge castle would not give up its secrets easily.

As the night wore on, Tom's mood turned more toward pessimism. He had been wandering for an hour and there was nothing in this section of dungeon (near the Slytherin dormitories) to indicate anything interesting. He figured that Slytherin would have built the Chamber of Secrets below ground, or possibly below the lake, but the entrance could be anywhere. And it had to be well-concealed.

Tom sighed. Upstairs, his partner-in-crime, Pandora Piper, was still eating candy with her friends. She had told Tom she would meet him at nine to begin the search, but Tom was too eager to begin, and had left the Great Hall just as dessert appeared. Glancing at his Muggle watch, bought for him by his mother two years ago, Tom saw that it was ten minutes to nine.

'Oh, all right, go back to bed,' Tom told Nagini. The snake did not even thank him as she slithered off into the shadows. He muttered below his breath about how she was spoiled.

Once upstairs, he ran into a throng of students coming out of the Great Hall. The older students were energised and chattering; the younger students seemed lethargic, as though sated and wanting nothing more than to lay their small heads down on soft pillows. Tom was somewhere in the middle. He caught sight of Pandora and stepped aside to wait for her.

'Hi, Tom!' she said loudly.

'Shhh,' he said. 'I don't want any of your Gryffin-dumbs coming on our little mission.'

'You've made that very clear already,' Pandora said. 'I brought sweets!' She held up a bagful.

'I had the same idea,' Tom said, smiling and showing her the contents of his own bag.

'We're set then! Is... your familiar coming with us?'

'No, she wanted to sleep. I swear that snake is spoiled beyond repair. When she's at home, all she does is loll about next to the woodstove.'

'That's because she's cold-blooded. Just like you!'

'I am not cold-blooded,' said Tom. 'It's a good thing, too, because the dungeons are freezing. I've been down there for an hour already.'

'Eager beaver,' said Pandora.

'Don't you dare accuse me of being a beaver,' said Tom in dark tones.

'Hufflepuffs aren't that bad... they laugh even when they're the victims of a prank... hey, Tom, wait up!' Pandora ran to catch up with Tom, who was already halfway down the stairs to the dungeons. 'So what are we looking for, exactly?'

'I don't know,' Tom said slowly. 'I expect an entrance of some kind. It'll probably have a snake or serpent on it. Maybe a portrait or something... or a stone... or a statue. Blast it, I wish we would learn advanced revealing spells already!'

'Don't swear.'

'I mean, a simple *Revelio* isn't going to do it. No way. Salazar Slytherin would be more clever than that, and someone would have found the Chamber already.'

'If it exists,' said Pandora. 'What if it doesn't?'

Tom glowered at her. 'Then go back to your dumb-dumb tower. I don't care.'

Pandora huffed in similar annoyance. 'I'm just saying, be prepared! I think it exists, or I hope it exists, because that would be the bees' knees.'

A reluctant laugh erupted from Tom's lips. 'The bees' knees?'

'Yah.'

'Come on. Let's start down this corridor.'

The excitement of searching for a secret chamber soon wore off. Tom and Pandora finished off the treacle tart, the sweets, the fudge, and were left with cold hands and tired legs. Through abandoned corridors they trudged, opening doors, finding disused classrooms, storage closets, and (by accident) Professor Slughorn's private quarters. Tom had used an *Alohamora* charm to open the door, to find his Head of House sprawled on a plush red velvet sofa, snoring loudly, a near-empty bottle of mead resting on the table. They had crept back out as quietly as they could and then dissolved into noiseless laughter. A few minutes later, the night gloom was back.

'I'm tired,' Pandora said at ten-thirty.

'Curfew's not until midnight tonight, it's Halloween,' said Tom. 'It's a good night for uncovering secret things.'

'We're not going uncover anything if my eyelids freeze over,' she said.

'Your eyes won't freeze over!' Tom scoffed at her drama. 'It's not near cold enough.'

'Still,' said Pandora. 'We haven't found anything. No snakes or serpents. No secret passages.'

'Mmm,' said Tom. 'I reckon we could try again during the weekend.'

'Not during Quidditch,' Pandora reminded him. 'Did I tell you I'm trying out for Chaser next year?'

'Better watch out. Our Slytherin Beaters are ruthless.'

'Slytherin everything is ruthless,' said Pandora. 'I'm not scared of you lot. Come on, Tom, let's go to bed.'

Silence. Tom felt a squirm of embarrassment and he had no idea why. Suddenly he wished to be alone, to be in his own common room with a book, and nowhere near Pandora Piper. 'Yah, I'm tired,' he said a half-second too late to prevent the awkwardness. 'I assume you can find your own way back to the lion's den.'

'Yep!' Pandora said brightly, apparently unaware of Tom's odd moment. 'G'night.' She skipped off down the deserted hallway, twirling her hair braid in her fingers.

## Chapter Eleven

'Oh, excuse me – oof! Sorry!' Merope ran smack into a customer. The apothecary was packed because of the Christmas crowds. She, Merope, was frazzled and tired and bewildered. She'd gotten a request for extremely rare unicorn hairs, and she'd had to send an urgent message by Floo to Mr. Jigger's friend in Hogsmeade, instructing him to run into the Forbidden Forest and find some Merlin-blasted unicorns... Jigger himself was dealing with the Minister of Magic, who chose that day (of all days!) to drop by for a cup of tea, and Merope was left with a thousand things to do.

'Mum, can I go to the Quidditch store?' Tom, at his most unhelpful. Couldn't he see that she was busy?

'No,' she snapped, and ducked into the back room to grab an extra-large size jar of Pepper-Up Potion for a customer.

'Mum! I want to see their new Comet model –'

'It doesn't matter, Tom! We can't afford that nonsense anyway,' Merope cried over the din of the store. 'Make yourself useful somewhere.'

Tom got a sulky expression on his face. Merope swore he'd been like that ever since she told him he was the Heir of Slytherin. Well, if her son expected to be pampered because of his famous ancestor, he had another think coming. 'Here now, Tom, you can go and feed the carnivorous plants out in the garden.'

He glared at her, but made to grab the bucket of maggots to feed the Giant Bladderwort plants.

'Thank you,' said Merope. 'And,' she lowered her voice so that customers would not hear her advocating the use of under-age magic, 'maybe you can re-cast their Warming Charms as well. I know you're good at that.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Tom, but the praise lifted his shoulders, as Merope knew it would.

She was sorry that they couldn't afford to buy Tom a proper broom. As it was, he was forced to use a school broom for Quidditch, or

else borrow one from his wealthy friend Lestrange, which bothered him. There was no helping it, though, and Merope did not want Tom to get his hopes up by staring at the new Comet at Quality Quidditch Supplies. Merope had learned the hard way that when you wanted something, it was better to keep reminders of it as far away as possible. She would never admit to it but increasingly she got heart pangs to look at her son; he looked more like his father every day, an ever-present memorial of what Merope had once had and then lost. At least her son Tom Riddle had dark blue eyes, rather than the soft dark brown of his father's. It was enough of a difference to count for something.

She heard Tom's loud curse as one of the Venomous Tentaculas tried to grab him. They had been getting ornery lately; Merope suspected it was the cold weather.

'Oh, no,' she groaned as the door jingled again and Professor Slughorn, Tom's teacher at Hogwarts, entered the shop. The man would take up half the space and would want to talk to Jigger, who was having tea with the Minister... Merope did not look forward to speaking with Slughorn because of his habit of looking past her, as though looking for someone more interesting to come along and rescue him from the conversation. She busied herself with a jar of mimosa pods; they jumped and rattled around, hitting up against the glass, and Merope shook the jar just to be perverse. She thought she heard a squeal from inside.

'Mrs. Riddle!' Slughorn boomed. 'Or may I call you Merope?'

Merope almost dropped the mimosa pods in her shock. Was the professor speaking to her? He must be, for he used both her names... 'Yes, sir, Happy Christmas to you, sir,' Merope said. It was the greeting Jigger wanted her to use with all the customers this time of year.

Slughorn moved his hefty frame through the shop, closer to where Merope stood behind the counter. 'My dear woman,' he said. 'I've been hoping to speak with you. Your son Tom, he —' Slughorn chuckled, '—he's something else! Going places, that boy, the best potioneer I've seen in fifty years. He must inherit his talent from you.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Merope, blushing, but if Tom had inherited talent, it must have been from her. Certainly not from her ex-husband.

'I understand your late husband was a Muggle,' said Slughorn. 'Amazing, isn't it, how magic can flow so strongly from your side? Sometimes I wonder if it's not our half-blood wizards that are the most powerful. Tom'll be a great wizard, so he will...'

'But... aren't you head of Slytherin House?' Merope asked, confused. She'd thought Slughorn would be a blood purist.

'I like to think of myself as an encourager of talent, Mrs. Riddle, wherever talent may be. One of my favourite students is a Muggle-born Gryffindor! A hand at Transfiguration, she is. Nothing to compare to your Tom, of course. He's truly brilliant. A great favourite of all the staff! You raised him well, Mrs. Riddle, he can do no wrong.'

Merope, who had seen Tom's loose interpretation of the rules too many times, just nodded and smiled. It worried her that he could get into so much trouble and yet stay out of it. Whenever Tom recounted his activities at Hogwarts, Merope was struck by how he seemed to boss the other Slytherins around, incite them to hex other students, break curfew, and somehow come out of it smelling like a rose himself. None of this would she say to Slughorn, however.

'Making my annual trip to Diagon Alley, people to see, you know,' Slughorn was saying. 'Thought I'd pop in for some supplies... Murdock said he'd set aside my order...'

'Oh!' said Merope. She did remember a box in the back room with Slughorn's name on it. 'If you'll wait here, sir, I'll retrieve it for you.'

Slughorn smiled beneath his large mustache and hooked his thumbs on the lapels of his robes.

Merope ducked back into the storage closet, wondering how many times a day she went back and forth. Glancing around, she spotted the package on a top shelf, and heard a noise from outside. She popped her head to the freezing cold back garden. 'Tom! What are you doing?'

'Nothing,' Tom said. He was sitting on the high wall at the top of the garden and looked to be spying through the guestroom windows of the Leaky Cauldron next door.

'You're going to freeze your toes off out there,' said Merope. 'Your Head of House is in the shop. He'll want to see you. Why don't you come say hello?'

Tom flicked his wand and floated down off the wall. Magic always seemed so casual for him. 'Sluggy's here?'

'Don't call him that, he's your professor!' Merope said. 'Run along and say hello to him, now.'

A few minutes later, listening to Professor Slughorn fawn over Tom's good manners, his Quidditch ability, his Potions ability, and his general wonderful demeanor, in that order, Merope decided it was no wonder that the man had finally paid attention to her, Tom's mother. She smiled to herself. Tom could do the things she herself could not. He would be a great wizard.

Tom awoke to a headache. At least, he thought it was a headache at first, because of the pressure in his ears and the pounding and wailing that assaulted his senses. Then, as he blinked to clear himself from the fog of sleep, he realised that it was just the Muggles bombing each other again. Every night since he'd returned from Hogwarts for Christmas, the air raid sirens had gone off, followed by the distant crump of bombs dropping on Muggle London. Tonight, however, the sirens seemed louder, and Tom lay in his bed and listened to the drone of aircraft overhead, the whistle of bombs as they fell, the explosions that followed. It was as if a great mechanical monster was gnawing its way through the city, crashing with large footprints that left craters in its wake.

'I can't sleep through this,' Tom muttered to himself. He ran a hand through his tousled hair and got out of bed. He put on his slippers and flannel robe over his pyjamas because it was a cold night.

'Tom?' his mother asked as he ducked out of his bedroom below the eaves of the flat. 'You're awake too.'

'Can't sleep through this, can I?' he said.

His mother was standing at the window, a cup of tea in her shaking hand. 'It's going to be a bad one,' she said.

Tom joined her at the window and looked to the east.

The sight that met him through the thick glass was horrible, yet somehow beautiful at the same time. The sky was lit up with orange, yellow, and clouds of black that poured in columns and bands. Above the city, formations of the German Muggle bombers flew with propellers grinding through the air like bared teeth. From their bellies dropped row after row of metal cigars. They soared through the air and struck, boom, boom, one after the other after the other until it was a solid wave of thunder without pause. The air raid klaxons shrieked warning, as if anyone could be ignorant of the danger.

'Mum, what's happening?' Tom asked. Something strange churned in his belly, an eagerness mingled with fear. The destruction was so wanton that it seduced him.

'The Germans,' Merope said. 'This is the worst I've ever seen it.' Indeed the city looked to be burning from the East End all the way to Soho. It was impossible to hear the screams of individuals above the barrage, but Tom knew that out there, in burning London, many people were dying.

'Do you think the German wizards will come, too?' Tom asked.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I hope not. Everything I read in the Daily Prophet says they're ruthless. If they're anything like the Muggles...' She took a deep sip of her tea and Tom could see small tears at the corners of her eyes. He knew that she hated loud noises.

'Don't worry, Mum,' he said. He put an arm around her shoulder. 'It'll be all right. Someday the war will have to end, and they'll rebuild all of this, and we'll finally be able to get some sleep around here.'

Merope let out a squawk of a laugh. 'Yes, I suppose you're right,' she said.

They stood like that for a long while, watching the clash of metal and stone and fire and blood, each feeling disconnected from it. It was near midnight when Tom heard a noise that was much closer to home. A shouting, a clamour in Diagon Alley. At first he thought that

it was just the wizarding world reacting to the Muggle horror outside their charmed enclave.

'What do you want me to cook for your birthday?' his mother was saying. 'It's just two days away, I can't believe you're going to be fourteen –'

'Shhh,' Tom said. 'Did you hear that?'

'Hear what?' Merope said. But she fell silent.

'I think you better put a cloak on,' Tom said quickly. 'Nagini!' He switched to Parseltongue. 'Come to me.'

The snake awoke from the dark, warm corner by the stove where she slumbered, peering a large head at Tom. 'What now?'

'Just stay awake,' said Tom. He went into his room and put on some shoes and a warm winter cloak over his pyjamas, along with a hat and gloves. Then he heard someone's footfalls racing up their musical staircase.

Pounding on the door. Merope opened it and Mr. Jigger burst into the room, the whites of his eyes flashing in panic. 'I need you downstairs, Merope,' he said. 'We need to cast wards on the shop. On the orders of the Ministry of Magic.'

'What?' Merope said. She sounded bewildered. 'Why?'

'The entire city is on fire, woman! They don't think they can hold it off from here. In fact, they're worried about a direct hit on Diagon Alley – damn the Muggles – come on, grab your wand!'

'But—but I don't know how to cast fire repellent wards!' Merope cried.

'I do,' said Tom. 'I'll show you, Mum. It's not hard. If you don't mind, of course, Mr. Jigger,' he said respectfully. He did not want his mum's boss realising how comfortable he was with performing magic outside of Hogwarts.

'Good, good,' Jigger said, already out the door. 'Both of you come along, then!'

'Come,' Tom said to Nagini. She followed them out the door.

Downstairs in the apothecary, Tom noticed how Mr. Jigger ran around like a demented chicken, doing a shoddy job on his wards, in a complete panic. He frowned. Looking about him, Tom saw that the area in most danger was the back storeroom and garden, because it was pressed up against Diagon Alley's main wards and the border with Muggle London. He went outside and calmly began casting. He heard his mother's footsteps behind him.

'I wish I'd gone to Hogwarts,' she sighed. 'They sure teach you advanced magic.'

'They didn't teach me this,' said Tom. 'I taught myself.'

'Oh,' said Merope.

Because his back was turned to her, he allowed himself a smile. He knew that he scared his mother sometimes. This pleased him. He wanted to prove to his mother that she oughtn't be ashamed of her son. That she was a brilliant witch, because he was a brilliant wizard. 'I'll show you,' he said. And he did; he recited the incantations, demonstrated the proper wand motion, described the intention. 'See,' Tom said. 'Incendio!' He set a small bunch of dried weeds on fire.

'Tom!'

'Watch,' said Tom. He glanced around to make sure Jigger wasn't watching him. He moved his wand to direct the flames against the wall; as soon as they got near, they sputtered and choked and died. 'Aguamenti,' he said, putting out the remaining flames. 'Easy!'

His mother giggled, although she had her hands twisted into a nervous knot. 'All right. I get it.'

'You're a quick learner, Mum, I think you—' Tom was interrupted by the sound of shouting from behind them, in the apothecary. What now? He glanced around for Nagini; she lurked in the corner of the garden, eyeing a mound of earth that indicated the presence of a gnome. The noise from Diagon Alley got louder.

Then, appearing in the doorway, his silver-blond hair illuminated by the orange sky, was Casper Malfoy.

'Mr. Malfoy!' Tom said, surprised.

His mother's head whipped around; it did not escape Tom how her body tensed at the sound of the name. 'Mr. Malfoy!' she echoed her son. 'What are you doing here?'

'You need to leave,' he said, with a decisive step into the garden. 'Now. Pack a small overnight bag, both of you, and we must go.'

'Why?' Merope asked. A blank look was in her eyes as though it was too much to absorb at once. Bombs, fire, and now...?

'An evacuation order has been issued for wizarding London,' Malfoy said. 'It's believed that Lord Grindelwald will coincide an attack here with the Muggle Blitzkrieg.'

'Now?' Merope gasped.

'Yes, now, woman!' Malfoy said, sounding impatient for the first time.

Tom stepped into action. 'Come on, Mum. Upstairs.' He grabbed his mother's arm and tugged her along. Glancing behind him, he hissed to Nagini, 'Stay at my heels, snake, and don't argue.'

Malfoy's lips turned up at the sound of Parseltongue. It appeared to be wry approval, from what Tom could see of the man's face in the light of the sky on fire. 'I'll be coming with you,' he said to Tom. 'We're going to Apparate to a safe place in the countryside.'

It took about ten minutes for Tom to pack his necessities into a bag and put Nagini around his shoulders. Merope clattered around the flat, flustered, and Tom suggested that he and Casper Malfoy step outside. Tom had a feeling that Malfoy's presence was making his mother lose her head a bit. She reappeared downstairs in the shop, dressed and with a small valise clutched in her hand, along with her wand.

'Ready?' Malfoy asked.

Merope nodded. 'What if it burns?' she whispered.

'It won't,' said Tom. 'Our wards are good. They'll protect even against magical fires, if Grindelwald's wizards do attack.'

'Speaking of that,' said Malfoy, gesturing out the window. 'We'd best go.' A troop of Aurors ran past the apothecary. They all had their wands brandished and their eyes fixed on a point down the street.

'What about Mr. Jigger?' Tom asked. He did not particularly want to see the apothecary overrun by Dark wizards.

'I'm here!' Jigger's head popped in from the back door. 'It's true. The Ministry is evacuating all residents from Diagon Alley. I'm taking my family to my sister's house in Wales. Do you need to use the Floo Network? We've set up a one-way...'

'No, thank you,' said Tom. 'We're Apparating.'

'Best hurry,' said Jigger. He stepped through the back door, closed it to the outside, and locked it. 'Out, now. I'm locking the shop. I hope it's still standing in the morning.' The man's face was flushed and behind his glasses his eyes darted around nervously. 'I never thought I'd see this... Good luck.'

'Good luck, Mr. Jigger,' said Merope. She clutched her valise even tighter.

Out on the street, chaos reigned. Witches and wizards ran around, along with goblins, house-elves, and the occasional broomstick that zoomed along without an owner. Tom stared down the street; was there an explosion there? A large crowd was gathered and he thought he saw the jet of spell-light, the casting of curses. He would have run to see for himself, except that he had his mother and Nagini to worry about. Their safety came before his curiosity.

'We're Apparating to Malfoy Manor,' said Malfoy. 'Wiltshire. Just focus on the name and it should be enough, I've set up a homing charm to help you – what's the matter, Merope?'

'Oh,' said Merope. 'It's just that I – I can't...'

'I know you're scared, it's all right,' said Malfoy.

Tom bit his tongue.

'I don't know how to Apparate,' Merope said miserably. 'I never learned.'

'Oh,' said Malfoy. He frowned. 'Well... I'll take one of you first, then, and come back.'

'But that will exhaust you!' Merope cried.

'We don't have a choice,' Malfoy said tersely. 'The Floo Networks are closed except for those with permission. Tom, take my arm.'

'No,' said Tom. 'Take my mum first. I'll wait here. I can wait.'

'No, Tom, go!' Merope said. She glanced down the street with eyes rolling like a frightened animal. 'They're almost here!'

It was no-one's imagination that the air around them grew hotter by the minute. The sound of the Muggle bombs flying, falling, exploding around them was deafening; not a few blocks away, flames licked the sky. The fires approached fast. Tom looked up into the sky and saw formation after formation of German bombers, their ranks never-ending, flying steady across the smoke and clouds.

Down the street, the shouts of Aurors could be heard. More and more people came running from the direction of the square outside Gringott's Bank. Tom thought perhaps Grindelwald's Dark wizards really had made their way to Diagon Alley.

'Take my mother and go,' he repeated to Casper Malfoy. 'I can try to Apparate myself, if you want.'

'Absolutely not!' Merope said, aghast.

'No,' said Malfoy. 'I'll come back for you.' He clapped a hand on Tom's shoulder. 'Don't move from this spot. I won't be more than five minutes.'

Then, with a loud crack, Tom's mother and Casper Malfoy were gone. Tom took a deep breath. 'Don't worry,' he told Nagini, more for his sake than hers. He wondered if any of his classmates from Hogwarts were caught in the mess down the street. And he was

glad Malfoy had not taken him up on his offer to Apparate himself; the truth was, he'd tried Apparition on the grounds at Hogwarts and ended up splinching himself. He'd gotten help from Professor Slughorn, who chucked him under the chin, but told him not to ever try that again without proper supervision.

Tom heard a long scream from somewhere. He tightened his hold on his small suitcase and took his wand out of his pocket. If any Dark wizards came by, he would show them... He turned around in a slow full circle, wand at the ready. A Muggle bomb exploded somewhere very close by, and then another. Tom looked to the east again... and gasped aloud. 'St. Paul's,' he whispered to himself. Indeed the landmark cathedral stood out of the smoke and flame, perfectly intact, a great white dome that was completely at odds with the hellish scene around it. Tom wondered if it would stay untouched that night and his intuition told him that yes, it would.

Crack. It was Malfoy. 'Come,' he said to Tom, out of breath. 'Take my arm. Nagini won't object to Apparition, will she?'

'I don't know, she's never done it, sir,' said Tom.

'Well, it'll be over quickly enough. You can help me by concentrating, too. Malfoy Manor.'

'Malfoy Manor,' Tom repeated. 'Right.'

Tom's heart gave a great leap of sudden fear as he heard Malfoy give the command; he did not want to be splinched again. He focused as hard as he could on Malfoy Manor, Malfoy Manor, Malfoy Manor... it was a tongue-twister for his brain. Then, as quickly as he'd been squeezed, the pressure let up and Tom found himself standing on a country lane with a large iron gate splitting the hedge in front of him.

Next to him, Malfoy doubled over and coughed. It was a great effort to make four Apparitions in the course of a few minutes. 'Are you all right?' Tom asked.

'Y-yes,' said Malfoy shakily. 'Just – give me a minute.'

Tom nodded. His mother stood several feet away. 'Tom, thank Merlin!' she said, throwing her arms around him and Nagini. The snake hissed with discomfort but Merope paid no heed.

'I'm hungry,' Nagini said.

'Go and hunt, then,' said Tom. 'And stay out of trouble. We're guests here.'

'Yesss, Tom,' said Nagini, and she uncoiled herself from around her shoulders and disappeared into the dark quiet of the countryside. Tom watched her go with fondness.

Malfoy, who had recovered his composure enough to stand upright, took Merope's arm. 'My brother's house,' he said. His voice was hoarse. 'He knows we are coming. He has many rooms.'

That, thought Tom as they walked up the drive, was an understatement. Malfoy Manor was huge. It was attractively situated on the crest of a hill, a massive towering edifice of limestone with a beautiful Palladian symmetry. All the lights were blazing, which struck Tom as odd, accustomed as he was to the lights of London being blacked out. These people were not afraid of war. Tom would have bet a hundred Galleons that the Manor was Unplottable, at least, and had heavy wards.

They walked at a slow pace up the drive and when they were close to the carved iron front doors, a voice hailed them. 'Casper!' The doors swung open to reveal a silhouetted figure of a tall wizard in dress robes.

'Abraxas,' said Casper.

Tom tightened his jaw, resolved not be intimidated by the Malfoys' wealth and power. You're the Heir of Slytherin, he reminded himself. What a mantra it had become for him. Setting his shoulders straight, he stepped up into the light. His mother and Casper walked up the stairs, as well, and into the house.

When he got inside, Tom was very glad that he'd been at Hogwarts for three years already. It got him used to large, grand buildings, so that he did not have the frightened-rabbit look that graced his mother's face. Her eyes rolled up to the ceiling and her jaw looked

slightly unhinged. This was for good reason. The entrance hall of Malfoy Manor had a shiny marble floor in a beautiful, intricate black-and-white pattern. A crystal chandelier floated from the ceiling. A staircase, carved of solid mahogany, stretched down from the first floor. Dark purple walls were covered in family portraits, almost too many, as though an overcompensation.

In the well-lit hall, Tom got a better look at Abraxas Malfoy, Casper's brother. He was not nearly as old as Casper, and much better-looking, from as much as Tom could judge. He also had a sneer on his face as he gave Tom's mother the once-over. A hot spark of anger flared up in Tom's belly. He repressed it, for the time being.

'Abraxas, thank you for having us,' said Casper formally. 'I'd like to introduce Mrs. Merope Riddle and her son, Tom.'

Abraxas's eyes narrowed at the name, but he thrust out a hand for Merope to shake with ill grace. 'Madam. How do you do.'

'How do you do,' Merope whispered.

Without even looking at Tom, Abraxas snapped his fingers and a house-elf appeared. 'Take them to the guest wing,' he ordered the small creature, and turned back to Casper. 'If you'll excuse me, brother, I must attend to some business. I trust you know your way around.'

'Perfectly,' said Casper. 'Oh, and Abraxas?'

'Yes?'

'Please remember to prepare those papers for me. About the Helios Company.'

'Yes, brother.' Abraxas Malfoy's voice was tight.

When the owner of the Manor was out of sight, Tom smiled. He noticed that Casper had neatly put his younger brother in his place. 'Sir? How long will we be staying here?' he asked.

'Until it's safe to return to London,' said Casper. 'You'll be no imposition. I doubt you'll even have to see my brother and his wife... please excuse his manner. He is a snob. But he does not know what

'we know about you, eh?' Casper touched his nose and Tom knew he was referring to the Slytherin lineage. 'Come. Let us follow the elf.'

Merope dawdled in the entrance hall, still gawping, and Tom took her arm. He whispered, 'Come on, Mum. It's just a big old house, that's all.'

'It's so big!' she said, scurrying alongside him.

Tom felt a tingle of embarrassment at his mother, but tried instead to focus on his relief that they were safe. He knew he should be grateful and took a deep breath as he began to climb the grand staircase.

## Chapter Twelve

Dinners at Malfoy Manor were cold; a carefully orchestrated dance of silver and champagne and food that looked more like art. Conversation was polite and chill. No one made sudden movements, or reached for anything beyond their plate. Certainly no one laughed. Merope felt so out of her element that she wanted to cry with anxiety every time she sat down with the Malfoy family. She prayed for the fighting to calm down in London so she could return to her humble, manageable attic in Diagon Alley.

Her hands shook when she reached for her glass of wine; she was terrified she might tip something over in her clumsiness. Support could be found in Casper's eyes, when he looked at her, but mostly he paid attention to his brother Abraxas.

Tom, on the other hand, took to the Malfoys' grand manners with an almost ridiculous ease. For every cold glance they gave the boy, he returned it double. His movements were icy, his 'thank you's' were perfect in tone, and he was so restrained that Merope was reminded of a snake stalking a rabbit. It was unnerving, as Tom's behaviour often was. Her son did not get his highborn manners from her side of the family.

In a twist of irony, it was that aristocratic side of Tom Marvolo Riddle that seemed to be causing the trouble for the Malfoys. The brother, Abraxas, had made openly rude comments about Muggles and those who associate with them... even aristocratic Muggles. Merope always choked and Casper always looked uncomfortable; the day before, she'd heard Casper admonishing his brother in a foreign language. But she'd heard her name interspersed with the unfamiliar tongue and knew they were discussing her.

Even the walls talked.

'She was eighteen when she married the Muggle,' one Malfoy portrait whispered to another.

'Very odd,' said a statue. 'A half-blood sorted into Slytherin. The Hat didn't even touch his head or think about it, so these marble ears have heard. Perhaps the Hogwarts sorting system has gone askew.'

'Such a shame. Perhaps a Muggle was all she could get. Perhaps she enchanted him... Merlin knows the son looks nothing like her...'

Merope was tempted to take a knife to those portraits. They were too clever by half.

Politics, too, were a favourite topic of conversation in Malfoy Manor. Most of the time, Abraxas and Casper spoke politics, and Veridian sat elegant at her end of the table, blonde hair set in waves around her lovely young face.

After a few days, Merope learned that Grindelwald's attack on wizarding London had actually been quite minor... more a demonstration than a determined effort at bloodshed. There had been some hexes and jinxes and vandalism. The main danger had come from the weakened wards against Muggle London's firestorm.

"You see," said Abraxas one night, "it proves that association with Muggles is dangerous. Grindelwald has never, and will never, wage a war of attrition against fellow wizards. The more we seclude ourselves from Muggles, the better."

Merope thought of a miserable little cottage in an isolated wood and she heard the voices ('Not fit to associate with, scum of the earth, lower than house-elves... isolation is the answer, children, you hear?') from her past and she shuddered.

"You're being impractical," said Casper. "Purely from a business perspective, we should have diversified assets... Muggle ones, even. Their destruction won't do us any good!"

"Muggle assets?" Abraxas's voice was hardly raised, but his tone accomplished what yelling could not. Besides, over-loud voices might damage their precious crystal glassware.

"Yes," said Casper, "property. Businesses. The last time I checked, Gringotts had a listed currency exchange rate against the pound sterling."

Abraxas muttered something that Merope couldn't catch.

Tom, meanwhile, had followed the exchange with keen eyes. He had that hungry look on his face that meant he was learning something.

Veridian, gracious hostess that she was, attempted to veer the conversation into calmer waters. "Business opportunities aside, ought not the wizards have some responsibility for Muggles?"

"Precisely, my dear, precisely," said Abraxas, tipping back his glass of elderberry wine.

"Hmm," Casper brought his fingers up and tapped his chin. "I believe wizards should use their power to their own advantage, of course... but in the realm of enterprise. Do I think the Statute of Secrecy should be repealed? Yes. But not to rule them directly... imagine what a fortune we could make selling potions to Muggles. This current trend toward annihilation and genocide is counterproductive."

"You're missing Grindelwald's real ideology," said Abraxas. "He doesn't believe in killing all the Muggles... although if it happens, it happens. His manifesto is about correcting historical wrongs against wizards. We have a superior position and Grindelwald will see to it that we keep it that way."

"And this ridiculous prejudice against Muggle-born wizards..."

"Blood loyalty is, of course, important," said Abraxas with a quick glance to Merope. "But it's magic itself that's being defended."

"By fighting amongst ourselves?" Casper asked.

Abraxas waved his hand. "Unfortunate side effects. But you must realise, brother, that it's toward a higher purpose... it serves a greater good! I've seen... he's said..." Abraxas trailed off. "It was in the papers."

Merope had not seen a copy of the Daily Prophet since she arrived at Malfoy Manor, but by Casper's dubious expression she doubted any such announcement by Grindelwald of higher motives to his madness. All she knew was that she'd been terrified that night on Diagon Alley, fearful of her life and that of Tom, and she'd thought

the whole place would be destroyed. For whatever 'greater good,' Merope didn't care.

Her greater good was a steady job and a place to call home so she could raise her son.

Veridian also moved the topic away from blood status, which made Merope wonder how far back the Malfoys themselves went. They could be just a few generations from Muggle, which was why they were so adamant about wizards' rights. Even worse – Merope suppressed a hiccup of laughter – they might have been Muggles in trade! Now that would be a sight.

Somehow, though, Merope thought her father would have approved of her connection to Casper, even if the family wasn't very old. The prospect of magical fortune would have been enough to overcome any other qualms. But he's dead, Merope reminded herself, in Azkaban. The other relevant players were not likewise dead, but their shadows did not even rise in her mind... because she took a sip of the sweet wine instead, and gave Tom a tiny smile from across the table.

I could get used to this, Tom thought as he looked around his guest room.

For all of the unfriendliness of his hosts, Tom loved that the bedroom was larger than his entire flat; it had an adjoining bathroom, a sitting room, and from there a door that connected to his mother's suite of rooms. Nagini was taken with the Manor, as well; she spent the cold days outside hunting rabbits but not eating them. She'd eaten an entire piglet when they first arrived and was not hungry yet. When the weather got too cold, she came inside and coiled up next to Tom's fireplace, hissing with contentment.

In spite of the war and the recent violence, the Malfoys were throwing a lavish ball for New Year's Eve. Abraxas and Veridian insisted that they had an image to maintain and dismissed Casper's suggestion that it was poor taste to host a party while London continued to burn.

'Besides,' the beautiful Veridian More-Malfoy had said, 'we don't take sides in wars that are beneath us.'

Tom did not like Abraxas's wife any more than he liked the man himself. They were both snooty, unfriendly, and up on themselves. And Veridian had a head full of hot air. He would like to give this opinion freely, but he was ever-mindful that he was a guest in their home, and instead shared his thoughts with his mother only. He had her in gales of laughter with his imitation of the Malfoys' behaviour.

So it was that on Tom's fourteenth birthday, he stood in front of a full-length mirror in the grand Malfoy Manor, adjusting the lapels on the first set of dress robes he'd ever worn. He was invited to the party. That was a good feeling; Casper Malfoy was so unlike his brother in general good humour that Tom found it difficult to believe they were related and raised by the same father. He smiled at himself in the mirror, satisfied. He looked sharp.

A knock on the door sounded. 'Come in,' Tom said.

It was Merope. 'Hi, darling,' she said, poking her head in. 'I wanted to make sure you're dressed – oh, just look at you, so handsome!' She stepped full into the room. 'Oh, Tommy, you're growing up so fast...'

'Mum,' he said, annoyed at his nickname. Typical that she would fawn all over him, and probably muss up his carefully combed hair, as well. 'It was nice of Casper to buy these robes for me,' he said.

'Yes, it was,' Merope said. 'He's a very generous man.'

'Mmhmm,' Tom smirked, thinking that Casper Malfoy had his reasons to be generous to the Riddles. In the mirror's reflection, he saw his mother step into the light and he turned around to look at her, raising his eyebrows. 'You look gorgeous!' he blurted.

Merope blushed and then smiled, showing teeth that were white but uneven. 'Thank you!' she said, twirling once. And Tom spoke the truth; his mother looked elegant in a way he'd never imagined she could. Her hair was lustrous, pulled up halfway into curls; the dress she wore was dark pink and seemed to float above the ground. The rosy colour suited her skin and made her cheeks glow. Even her dull eyes held sparkle.

'And what is that?' he asked, nodding at a thin rope of diamonds around her neck.

'Oh,' Merope giggled, her hand flying to her throat, 'a gift.'

'From Casper.'

'Yes...'

'You fancy him, Mum! Admit it!'

Merope blushed again and bit her lip. For a moment Tom felt as though he was older than she was. 'All right, a bit,' she acknowledged. 'He's been so good to us.'

'Yes,' Tom mused.

'But never mind that tonight,' said Merope. She leaned over just a little (Tom was nearly as tall as she was now) and kissed him on the cheek. 'It's your birthday,' she said, 'and I want you to have fun. Think of it as your party, and don't mind all those stuffy folk.'

'Do you say that for my benefit or yours?' Tom asked. He rubbed the lipstick mark off his cheek, but he was smiling.

Merope shook her hands in a nervous gesture. 'It makes it easier,' she said. 'You and I'll stick together tonight. Right?'

'Right, Mum. Don't worry, you'll be fine.'

The New Year's gala was less difficult than Tom anticipated. Several of his classmates from Hogwarts were there: Cornelius Nott with his parents, Leo Lestrange with his. Michael and Druella, the Rosier children, were in attendance... Druella wore dress robes too low-cut for a fourteen-year-old. They were surprised to see Tom there. He'd been absent during their early society lives.

'Riddle, mate, what're you doing here?' Lestrange asked, clapping a familiar hand on Tom's shoulder.

'I could hardly avoid it,' said Tom.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm staying here. My mother and I. London's far too dangerous, even for wizards, you know.'

'You're staying here?'

Tom glanced around to check up on his mother. Parties frightened her. In the well-dressed crowd he couldn't find her, though to his shock he saw Albus Dumbledore chatting in the corner to several Ministry officials. He ached to know what they were saying, but his friends had crowded around him and there was nothing to hide behind, anyway. Must invent an eavesdropping charm, he noted to himself. "Come on, Lestrange, I dare you to look down Druella's dress robes."

"Not fair," Avery whined. "I wanted to do that!"

All Tom could do was roll his eyes.

After his stay at Malfoy Manor, things seemed to shift subtly. Tom's life took on a glitter of new possibility. He began to imagine himself higher; he wanted the sort of power the Malfoys had. He wanted to be rich. He wanted to prove himself to the world and restore the good name and fortune of Salazar Slytherin. A tight, white burning lived in his chest; it started out as a spark and he could feel it growing with every lesson. His school routines took on new import. Sleeping, eating, joshing around with his friends, doing his homework... Tom tried to imbue all with a deeper purpose.

He watched his colleagues, fellow Slytherins even, float along on their lives' currents, lazy-like; he despised that sort of behaviour. And he held contempt for the students who were already wealthy and resting on their family's laurels. Malfoy Manor had given him a taste of the good life, as well as a sense of the snobbery he was up against.

'I have class without means,' he wrote to himself. He'd started keeping a diary, one that his mother had bought him for Christmas.

It became even more important to find the Chamber of Secrets, but he'd had no luck so far. He was missing something; at times a creeping finger of doubt touched his mind and questioned the Chamber's existence at all. Pandora Piper helped him search, but not often; they were too busy with schoolwork. Tom contemplated letting someone else in on his hidden heritage. Cornelius Nott

perhaps, or Leo Lestrange; Lestrange especially was devoted to him. His secrets they would keep.

But Tom stayed quiet. He wanted the moment to himself at first. He was secretive by nature and disinclined to share the initial burst of glory when he found (and he would find it, by Merlin!) the Chamber of Secrets.

'Too damn Secret,' Tom wrote in his diary, feeling a small thrill at the swear word. 'If Slytherin's own bloody heir can't find it, then who can?'

In spite of his frustration with the stalled search for the Chamber, Tom found other ways to excel. Slytherin won most of their Quidditch matches, thanks to him; if only those idiot Beaters, Mulciber and Ponce, would quit knocking Bludgers into their own teammates. Their loss against Ravenclaw had been due to Tom getting a broken arm from a misaimed Bludger. Tom's string of curses (not magical ones) had turned the air blue and Mulciber's face red. And the sanctimonious referee, Professor Drackett, had deducted a further thirty match points because of Tom's profanity.

However, his arm had been easily fixed, and the hospital ward had been flooded with sympathy cards, flowers, and candy for Tom, especially from the Slytherin girls. It had been most gratifying.

On a fine weather day in April, Dumbledore took their Transfiguration class outdoors to sit on the lawn and hear a lecture about sustaining Transfigured objects. It would have been boring to everyone except Tom, had they been stuck indoors. As it was, Dumbledore was clever and turned the class into more of a social outing. Tom had always felt Dumbledore was prejudiced against Slytherin House, but he had to admit that he liked the old man's style.

'And so,' Dumbledore was saying, 'as with all magic, it is the intent that is most important in maintaining a Transfiguration. You wouldn't want the object to revert to its original form at an inopportune time.' The water-filled goblet in his hand abruptly shifted back to a shoe, the water splashing over Dumbledore's robes and soaking the shoe. The class laughed.

'Now,' Dumbledore said, tipping the shoe upside down and shaking it dry, 'who can demonstrate the wand movement for semi-permanent Transfiguration?'

The class was silent; volunteering for Dumbledore was always a risky prospect. He was demanding of excellence. Tom thought about raising his hand; he could do the wand motion in his sleep. But he did not want to be a show-off. It wasn't worth it with the imbeciles in his class.

'Miss Hornby?' Dumbledore said sharply. 'Stop making eyes at Mr. Riddle and step up here, please.' The class laughed again as Olive Hornby turned red; Tom turned his lip down in distaste. Had Olive been staring at him? He wished she wouldn't, not when it embarrassed him as well as her. Girls were stupid, he decided.

Olive got the motion wrong and Dumbledore sent her scurrying back to her patted-down spot on the grass, although he did not give a harsh word.

'I'll do it,' Tom said, standing up.

'Excellent, Mr. Riddle! I knew we could count on you,' said Dumbledore, smiling.

Too easy, Tom thought, swishing his wand in precisely the right way. He won ten points for Slytherin. And it was a beautiful day, with the lake glinting with sunshine and the birds singing for the season.

## Chapter Thirteen

Heart thudding in her ears, blood rushing to her head, Merope's hands trembled as she put in her earrings. She still could not believe what her plans were for the evening: she had a date. An actual date. Someone thought her desirable... no, not just someone, Casper Malfoy.

Diagon Alley was safe once again, according to the Ministry; the German Dark wizards had taken a series of blows over the summer and were on the defensive in Europe. The autumn of 1941 was a grim time, but wizarding Britain was getting their act together more quickly than the Muggles were. And the Blitz had tapered off, thank Merlin, and Merope could sleep nights once more. She contemplated again how lucky she was to have a friend like Casper; that night in December last year had been so frightening for all of Diagon Alley's residents.

She smiled to herself. Casper Malfoy. What a strange creature he was. Most of the year he'd spent travelling the world, engaged in business transactions, posting letters from such exotic locales as Greece, Iraq, and India. He'd kept in touch with her. His letters were warm, if not flowery. And now he was back in London again and had sought her out, plain Merope, ugly Merope.

As she got ready for him to retrieve her from the apothecary, Merope tried to concentrate on her good points rather than her faults. She did not think about her dull eyes, her uneven features, her crooked teeth. Instead she thought about her hands (dainty and well-kept) and her hair, made nice by charms, and her long eyelashes which did more credit to her eyes than they deserved. Her navy blue frock was plain, though flattering to her slim figure. When she smiled into the mirror, pretending it was Casper, her face was transformed from blandness into sweet life.

She clattered down the stairwell and entered the shop just as Casper walked in.

'Hello,' he said, bowing.

'Hello,' she replied, shy as a schoolgirl.

'Have a good time, you two,' said Mr. Jigger, who sat behind the counter, going over the weekly accounts. 'Don't need a chaperone, do yah?' He gave a knowing wink.

Merope blushed. 'No, sir, thank you,' she mumbled.

Casper held out his arm and Merope took it. A delicious warmth crept through her fingers, up her arm, and down into the pit of her belly. It felt so nice to be with a man. It had been years, so many years, since she'd felt wanted... and that first time had not been genuine. She did not dwell on it too hard. Merope was superstitious and felt that to question her good luck would cause it to disappear.

They walked down Diagon Alley together. 'Where are we going?' Merope asked.

'A small restaurant. It is very exclusive,' said Casper.

Merope gulped. She hoped she did not drop her fork or spill her wine. Stressful situations made her so damnably clumsy. When she was with Casper, people tended to stare, too; not at her, never at her, but at the blond wizard who was the head of Britain's wealthiest family.

'It's also in Muggle London,' Casper added, and Merope drew in a surprised breath. She'd not been expecting that from him.

They exited Diagon Alley through the Leaky Cauldron and walked out onto Charing Cross Road. Merope knew the city well enough; it felt surreal to be in it with Casper, though. He hailed a black cab and they careened off through the evening crowds, past grand stone facades and Muggles in their shabby wartime fashions.

When they were situated at a small table in a private niche at the restaurant (it was very exclusive) Casper leaned over and whispered, 'Is this suitable for you?'

Merope nodded emphatically, pushing away a vague unease. Nice restaurants, high society, even this neighbourhood of Mayfair... it was all too much like her short domestic life with Tom Riddle. Although she didn't recognise a single face, still she was relieved that their table was obscured from the rest of the establishment by an ornate wooden screen. They'd gotten a few sideways glances

with the way they were dressed, though the host had been happy to take Casper's generous tip.

'I don't like when people – Muggles or wizarding people – stare at you,' she said. 'It makes me think they're jealous of you, or want to harm you.' Merope forgot that her first reaction to the Malfoys had been one of awe and envy, just like the people who stared. In a way, she was still envious of their fortune, a low and simmering emotion that rarely made a sound against the everyday cacophony of her conscious mind.

'They would stare at you if they knew your background, my dear,' said Casper, tipping his wine glass in her direction. He smiled kindly, but there was a note of something else in his voice. Could it be... envy, too?

Merope licked her lips. 'I don't see how that has to do with anything.' Her sensitivity to her famous ancestor had not abated over the years. The last thing she wanted was for Malfoy to start sounding like her father.

'It is not something to be ashamed of,' said Casper. 'Tom is not afraid to speak of it.'

'Tom is... a strange child,' said Merope. Her face held both affection and bewilderment. 'I don't understand him sometimes... there's something hard and ruthless inside of him. I'm not sure why.'

'You have done well with him,' said Casper. 'And I believe you were right to withhold his knowledge about his ancestry until he was older. He cannot stand on anything but his own feet now.'

Merope smiled. 'Thank you,' she said softly. 'I've done the best I could.'

'And a good job you've done.'

'It's difficult!' she said. 'I just sort of bumble along. No one ever taught me how to mother a child.' She dropped her gaze, thinking of her own mother, so cowardly and so dead and so absent during her years of abuse at the hands of the family men.

Casper's white brow furrowed. He peered at Merope as though looking for something. 'Do you like me?' he asked.

She stuttered over her response. 'I-I yes, well, of course I like you!'

'Do you like me enough to marry me?' Casper asked.

Merope stared at him. He was not serious. This was a joke. How could he toy with her heart? Casper's pale eyes glinted in the candlelight and appeared honest; his mouth was pressed together, as were his hands, as if pleading. 'You can't be serious,' she said. She regretted her choice of words immediately because it sounded like a refusal.

Casper blinked. 'I am very serious,' he murmured. 'You do not believe me.'

'I—Casper, I know what I look like, I'm nothing special. You're the richest wizard in Britain! You could have any beautiful witch you wanted, not old—old me.'

He smiled a little bit. 'You're more special than you know, Merope. And I care for your son, too. Tom is an extraordinary young man. We could do well together, the three of us.'

'Is this because we're descended from Slytherin?' Merope asked. A horrible suspicion bloomed in her mind and she recalled the conversation she'd had with Tom about this very subject. As she'd learned during her stay with them, the Malfoys were 'new' money. They did not have a long history in wizarding Britain and no one even knew how pureblooded they were. Tom had noticed how the brother, Abraxas Malfoy, had married a pureblood witch from a good British family. Tom had also wondered if Casper Malfoy might also try to attach himself to someone with a similar background... Merope realised that Tom had been warning her in his peculiar way.

Her hands twisted in her lap. What would she say? Was it worth it to her to have a husband to support them, even if that husband only wanted to be stepfather to the Heir of Slytherin? And Merope could not deny that she'd tossed and turned in her bed some nights, thinking about Casper, about his eyes looking at her and his hands touching her... gently and guiltlessly and without hatred...

She realised that the silence had gone on for far too long. The gentle clinking sounds of the restaurant filled her ears as she brought her gaze back to Casper. He was staring at a spot on the white tablecloth. 'Merope,' he began.

'I didn't mean for it to sound like that,' Merope blurted. She realised that she'd already made up her mind. 'I'm sorry. I'm not very... good with words.'

'It is fine,' said Casper. 'It was a fair question.' He took a deep breath and met her eyes once more. 'Of course I would lie to say that your descendants from Salazar Slytherin is not of interest to me. Tom will have a position to uphold when he grows up. But believe me, Merope! I have come to care for you. You are a kind and good woman and I do not believe you want me for my money. You already have a job that you are good at. You are not one of these... what do you call them... debutantes with no brain. I can speak to you about things. You intrigue me.'

'Merope Malfoy,' she whispered, almost to herself. It had such a pleasant sound to it.

'Will you marry me?' Casper repeated.

'Yes,' Merope said. She felt a thrill up her arms as he clasped her small hands, resting on the table. 'I will marry you.'

'You have made me very happy,' Casper said. 'Should I ask your son for your hand in marriage?'

'Yes, he would like that,' Merope said. For a dark and twisting moment she remembered her other marriage. Her ex-husband was still alive. That was something neither Tom nor Casper knew. And as for asking for her hand... Merope could not bear to get in contact with her brother Morfin (heavy boots on the floor heavy hand over her mouth) and so she decided yes, it was best for Casper to ask Tom permission to marry his mother. She forced a smile on her face. 'He'll be happy,' she told Casper. 'Tom does like you a great deal. I think you're his idol.'

They ate dinner together. Merope's stomach was leaping around inside of her and she had little appetite, but managed to finish her dessert. Dessert always made a person feel better. When she

grasped Casper's arm on their way out of the restaurant, she contemplated the future she faced now: a husband. Sharing her bed with this tall, blond wizard. A large house, no doubt, and she could quit the drudgery of her apothecary job. Merope smiled. How had things turned out so well for her? She gave Casper's arm a bold squeeze. 'Thank you for dinner,' she whispered in his ear.

Casper smiled down at her. 'You're most welcome, my dear.'

When he dropped her at the door of the shop in the dark desolation of Diagon Alley, he caressed her cheek with a gentle hand. Merope felt self-conscious. Did he really think her beautiful? But then, in a moment that would shine bright for the rest of her life, Casper leaned down, ever so close, and then his lips were kissing her on the mouth. And this time it was true.

Tom did not like the month of November. It had nothing going for it; the weather was cold, damp, and dark, there were no holidays, and it lacked the crisp thrill of October or the holiday warmth of December. Furthermore, examinations were a long way off and he was so far ahead in his schoolwork that he was bored out of his skull.

After glaring out the window of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, he turned his attention back to the doodle on his page. It was a sketch of Nagini, loop after loop of shining black scales. Medium: quill on parchment. Green ink. He signed his initials at the bottom of the page, TMR. At the front of the classroom, Professor Merrythought was droning on about the theory of counter-curses. Tom had read that section in the textbook ages ago. He wished they were having a practical instead of a lecture.

'Pssst. Tom.'

'What?' Tom turned to Cornelius Nott in the seat next to him.

'This lesson is rubbish.'

Tom nodded. Galatea Merrythought was an older, heavyset, robust woman with a deep voice and a pretty face. Her style of teaching was straightforward. But Tom could not help thinking that their education in Defense Against the Dark Arts was suffering, especially in light of developments in Europe. Merrythought focused on the aspects of the Dark Arts they were most likely to encounter:

dangerous creatures, minor hexes and jinxes, petty criminal acts, the fundamentals of defensive shields. In Tom's mind, boring and not nearly powerful enough. He'd read the reports in the Daily Prophet. Grindelwald's loyalists used the Unforgivable Curses with regularity.

And he knew from his own illicit forays into the Restricted Section that there was a lot more to the Dark Arts than simple hexes. Merrythought was holding out on them.

Tom turned the page of his parchment, pretending to take notes on the lecture, but instead he began jotting down the things he wanted to learn. The list was long. Before he knew it, the lecture was over and he had two parchment pages filled with his own personal curriculum... and a spark of an idea that, although still buried in his subconscious, would come forward soon enough.

He gathered his textbook and paper and quill. A frown crossed his face because his leather book-bag was ratty and worn; he needed a new one but could not afford it. He would need to work some charms on the handle so it didn't fall off. 'Potions after lunch,' he said to Cornelius as they walked out. 'I heard we're brewing Wit-Sharpening Potion today.'

'Yeah. I wish we didn't have Potions with the Ravenclaws, though. They're always showing off. They know more than we do.'

'Funny, I've never found that,' Tom mused.

'That's because you're a bloody genius,' said Ian Avery, falling into step with Tom and Cornelius. 'The rest of us actually have to work for things.'

'Don't blame me,' said Tom, spreading his hands. 'Hi there, Ash!' he called to the Ravenclaw Seeker.

'Hi Tom,' Ash returned. Several Ravenclaw girls also waved at Tom.

He was very friendly to them.

The halls of Hogwarts were crowded with students, moving in a surging crowd toward the Great Hall. The din was reassuring, voices

talking, laughing, the stamp of student feet. Tom took in a deep breath and allowed his well-being to show on his face.

'Tom! We liked your moves at Quidditch practise yesterday. We were watching.' Four Slytherin girls clustered around the trio of boys. They all spoke to Tom, in spite of Cornelius's attempts to get the attention of Lucretia Black by plucking at her sleeve.

'Thanks,' said Tom. 'But it was nothing, really.'

Lynx Gilder, one-half of an identical blonde set, giggled. Her sister Lamb giggled too.

'Sit with us at lunch?' That was Olive Hornby, ever bold.

'Naw, can't,' said Tom, without giving a reason why. It was fine having the attention of girls, but their incessant high-pitched chatter got on his nerves. He could only take so much of it.

'See you later, Lynx,' Avery called over his shoulder as they walked into the Great Hall.

Yes, thought Tom, looking around him from his crowded spot at the Slytherin table, everything was wonderful at Hogwarts. He waved across the room to Lawrence Carter at Ravenclaw, and then to a group of Hufflepuff third-years he'd advised on Charms last week, and then all the way across to Wolfin Fenwick and Pandora at the Gryffindor table. Lunch appeared before them and Tom took a long swig of pumpkin juice. He wanted to eat quickly so that he could dash to the library before Potions.

'Hey, Tom, look,' squeaked Antonin Dolohov. Tom smirked; Dolly's voice was still changing. They ribbed him endlessly about it.

'What is it, squeaky?'

'An owl for you,' said Dolohov, managing to keep his voice at a low octave.

Tom glanced up; sure enough, an owl was circling just above his head with a letter attached to its foot. 'Come here, bird,' he said, not wanting it to leave a mess in his plate of chips. 'You're late,' he told

the owl. He untied the letter, recognising his mother's handwriting, and gave the owl a snatched piece of bacon from Avery's sandwich.

'Hey!' Avery said, protesting.

Tom shrugged. 'Just get another one!' he said. 'The house-elves love you for it.' That was one benefit of searching for the Chamber of Secrets, he pondered, as he untied his letter. He knew the deep places of Hogwarts like the back of his own hand now. It was most convenient to know the location of the kitchens. And the house-elves loved him and were so obliging...

His jaw dropped when he focused on the letter his mother had sent. It was not from her at all, even though the address to him was in her handwriting.

Dear Tom,

I am sorry to surprise you at school. I would prefer to speak to you in person about this, but it is not possible at present. I am writing on behalf of your mother – she and I have made the decision to become engaged. Because you are the man of the house, I would not feel right about marrying her unless we had your blessing.

It is more than that, of course, Tom; I consider you a friend and I would be honoured to be part of your family, if you would have me. Rest assured that you and Merope would be provided for in every way. I care deeply for your mother, and I think of you as the son I never had.

Please write to me at your earliest opportunity – it is truly up to you now. Merope's only hesitation in marrying me was to bring a stepfather into your life if you did not want one.

Yours,

Casper Malfoy

P.S. How is Nagini?

Tom gulped and closed his jaw. Unbelievable! Conflicting emotions surged through his chest: astonishment, pride, joy, suspicion, fear. Above them all, a cool metallic voice whispered to him that Malfoy

was clever indeed, with that casual reminder of his patronage in buying Nagini all those years ago. Tom learned an important lesson in those few minutes he stared at the fine woven parchment: a gift can benefit the giver years later. It had won Casper entry into Tom's and Merope's lives. Very clever indeed.

Then, the rest of it occurred to him, and a slow smile spread across his face.

They would be rich. They would be provided for in every way. He could have that new Comet broom; he could have a new book-bag; he could have books. Hundreds of books. Anything he wanted.

'Tom?' Cornelius and the other boys were peering at him.

Tom folded the letter closed and wiped his face clean of emotion. He smiled at them, a meaningless smile this time, and shrugged. 'Just from my mum,' he said. 'Nothing important.'

'Are you sure?' Lestrange asked from the diagonal. 'You looked pretty happy for a minute.' Lestrange was the sharpest of Tom's friends.

'We got a rare ingredient in the shop,' Tom lied. 'I've been wanting to get my hands on it for awhile now.'

'Typical,' Avery muttered. 'You're such a swotter!'

'Not either,' Tom said lightly. He was fine with being teased as long as it took the attention off the real contents of the note. Beneath his calm exterior, however, he was still reeling. Change, it seemed, was upon him.

He excused himself from the table and went to the library as he'd planned to do... except he did not look at the textbook on advanced Charms. Instead he went to the History of Magic section and pulled out a genealogy; he knew those very well, ever since his research on the line of Salazar Slytherin. He remembered seeing mention of the Malfoys and looked it up in the index... 'Yes,' he murmured to himself. The library was empty except for some seventh-year Ravenclaws at a table.

Plunking himself into an empty chair, he read quickly through the section. The Malfoy family were only four generations pureblood; they were of Persian-French origin; one of the sons had made French wizarding history by marrying a female vampire. Tom was unsurprised; they were a pale and beautiful family. And vampire blood was quite glamorous in his opinion.

As he closed the book, a new possibility occurred to Tom, an unpalatable one: what if his mother had another child with Malfoy? What if he had a sibling? Tom frowned as a small ache squeezed at his heart... he recognised that it might turn to tears if he didn't control himself. He did not want a sibling. It was fine if Malfoy wanted to be his stepfather, but baby-like imps tugged Tom's mind in different directions.

Malfoy might want an heir. His heir. Any child of Merope Gaunt Riddle and Casper Malfoy would be the offspring of two pureblood families, with vampire blood on one side and Slytherin's blood on the other... whereas he, Tom child-number-one Riddle, had Muggle blood. His left fist clenched so tight that he could feel the crescent pressure of his fingernails in his palm.

That was not an option. Casper Malfoy was the head of that family, being the eldest brother, and he must want another son. It would not do for a half-blood to take over. Tom would find himself displaced.

But should he speak out against his mother's marriage to Casper? His heart ached at that, too. He genuinely liked and respected Casper Malfoy; he could even grow to love him as a surrogate father. And he loved his mother above all, and wanted to put her happiness above his own. She'd had a hard life, raising him on her own, toiling every day, and Tom knew that she was lonely with him away at school.

With a furious flick of his wand, he Banished the genealogy book back to its place on the shelf. What an unfair situation. He wished Malfoy were there so that he could get a read on the man's true intentions.

His afternoon in class did not go well; he was so distracted that he forgot to add dried eyebright to his cauldron and his Wit-Sharpening Potion turned a dull shade of puce. Slughorn clucked at him (just like

a bloody chicken, Tom thought irritably) and shook his head in surprise.

Couldn't Tom Riddle have an off day every once in awhile?

## Chapter Fourteen

'We need some fireworks. Definitely.' Cornelius Nott grinned, a smile splitting his narrow face in two.

'Yeah!' Antonin Dolohov echoed in his finally-settled-low voice. 'Let's set Gryffindor Tower on fire!'

'Shh, keep your voices down,' Tom urged. They were in Zonko's joke shop and it was very crowded on the first Hogsmeade weekend after Christmas holidays. Many of the students had gift money to spend, and for once Tom was included in that category.

Tom's holiday had been a subdued affair, but different from previous years, in that Casper Malfoy came over for dinner and Tom got a rather generous stipend of spending money for Christmas and for his fifteenth birthday. From his mother he'd gotten new school robes, because he'd grown about three inches since the summer. The wheels of change were grinding into gear; next month, his mother was moving into a larger flat on Diagon Alley, also courtesy of Casper. Tom was not sure what he thought about that; the flat above the apothecary had been his home all his life. It would be strange to come home to somewhere else.

He had come to terms with his mother's marriage. He liked Casper Malfoy a great deal, because the man was intelligent, powerful, and rich, and always knew the right gift to give Tom.

It hadn't stopped him looking up contraceptive potions in the Restricted Section, however. Tom was not above hedging his bets a little.

'We three kings of Orient are... smoking on a rubber cigar!' Ian Avery sang. The others joined in. 'It was loaded and exploded, now we're on yonder star!' Ian had learned the rude versions of various Christmas carols from his Squib cousin over the holidays; the Slytherin fourth-year boys had been singing nothing else since the start of the term.

'Are ya gonna buy something, or aren't ye?' The shopkeeper of Zonko's waved a stick at them.

'Come on, lads,' said Tom, grinning. 'Let's get these fireworks and get out of here.'

On the way out of the shop, the crowd of them - eight Slytherin boys in total - ran into their rival equivalents. A crowd of Gryffindor boys pushed and shoved their way into the shop, along with one girl (Pandora, of course).

'Oooh, it's Frankie Finnegan,' Avery mocked. 'Heard your Muggle parents wanted to send you overseas, on account of the war. Too bad they didn't manage it.'

'Heard you spent the holidays with Squibs, Avery,' Frank returned.

It was common knowledge about Avery's cousin.

'Shut up, mudblood,' Avery hissed.

Frank brought out his wand.

'Simmer down,' Tom interjected. 'Do you wanna be tossed out of the shop? Let's go.' He yanked on Avery's arm. On the way out, he caught the murderous expression on Frank Finnegan's face, but he also saw Wolfin's grin and Pandora's smirk. Even in inter-house conflicts, Tom came out with points on both sides.

Fireworks in tow, the Slytherins came up with various plots about what to do with them, each idea more ridiculous than the first. As they tromped through the late-winter slush back up to Hogwarts Castle, Tom clasped his gloved hands behind his back and pondered how best to use their booty from Zonko's. As usual, his idea was the most ingenious; he suggested they set the fireworks loose at the Valentine's Day dinner... and charm them to spell out 'Professor Kaige loves Professor Collier.'

The boys hooted. The Divination professor, Victoria Kaige, was a tall, imposing woman who had an uncanny ability to see through the fibs of wayward students. It would be brilliant to embarrass her with the Charms professor, Elbert Collier, who was a confirmed old bachelor. It appealed to Tom because they could never trace the prank back to him, and it was something the entire student body would enjoy. He grinned wickedly. Humiliation of the authorities gave him great glee.

'Tom, mate, you're a genius!' Lestrange declared. 'That is far and away the best idea ever.'

'You're making me blush,' Tom said.

'What if we get in trouble?' Cornelius said nervously.

'We won't. Unless one of you gives the game away. But none of you will, will you?'

'No way!' his friends chorused.

'I'll do the Charms work for the lettering,' Tom said. 'Vow of silence, lads.'

They made a pact that none of them would brag about their involvement or reveal the identities of their fellow pranksters. It would be more than enough to see the outraged embarrassment of their professors. 'True genius always goes unappreciated,' Tom intoned philosophically. 'Best to get used to the idea.'

Only, he was tempted to break their vow of silence; he knew that Pandora and Wolfin would get an absolute kick out it. Somehow, though, he figured that the Gryffindors would suspect him as the culprit, because great minds thought alike.

'Your hair is lovely, Merope. These curls must be natural.' Roxanne Malfoy-Yaxley kept her false smile plastered on her beautiful face and the lines around her eyes crinkled attractively. Roxanne's warm hands patted Merope's shoulders. 'Shall I call the house-elf to set it for you? I'm sure you're not used to the elves, with your... background.'

Merope felt as though her mouth was full of toffee. She could not keep up with the woman's double-edged compliments, her allusions to Merope's poverty, the hidden snobbery that infused every word. Instead of speaking, Merope just nodded her head. She preferred house-elves to Casper's sister; at least elves had a work ethic.

They were at Malfoy Manor in Merope's guest bedroom suite, a room in cream and gold and brown and ivory, ever so tasteful. It was the night of the engagement announcement and Abraxas was hosting a ball in celebration of his brother's imminent marriage.

Roxanne was meant to be helping Merope get ready, but her contribution so far was to make Merope so nervous that she trembled in her delicate goblin-made shoes.

The salon on Diagon Alley had once again done what they could with Merope's hair and nails, but short of a face transplant or a heavily-layered glamour charm, true beauty eluded her. The most she could hope for was nice. Respectable. Well-groomed. But Merope did not even feel that; instead she felt like she was drowning and flailing around and in a blind panic that she would do the wrong thing.

Her upbringing as a Gaunt in a filthy hovel had not prepared her for this. Nor had her decade-and-a-half of working as a humble apothecary assistant.

The house-elf arrived with a pop and set to work putting Merope's charmed curls into a twist at the top of her head. It took mere seconds; Merope would have spent hours trying to get the same effect if she'd done it herself.

Roxanne smiled like a cat. 'All of society is dying to meet you,' she said. 'You're such a refreshing stranger to all of us. And I thought we knew all the purebloods in England...' she gave a tinkling laugh. 'Of course, you can't be blamed, Merope. You never had a proper coming-out, did you? And marrying that Muggle... it must be so difficult to be a widow. You must have felt that your entire life had come to an end!'

Merope bit her tongue. 'Life has not been easy,' she demurred. 'But I would not trade my choices for the world.' She thought of Tom, her handsome son, the top of his class at Hogwarts. She wanted to throw it in Roxanne's face: that a son of a Muggle and a witch could be better and more powerful than any of them. But she didn't. She did not want to make an enemy of Roxanne Malfoy-Yaxley.

'This is such a nice gown,' Merope said, fingering the silk frock she wore. It was dark red and looked good with her pale skin and brown hair.

Roxanne had chosen it for her.

'It is nice,' Roxanne said airily. 'Last season, of course, but I didn't think you would mind. With this terrible war...' she sighed, 'it's so difficult to get the proper imports. Muggles make the best textiles, you know, because they rely on manual labour!'

'Mmm,' said Merope.

She wished Roxanne would leave and fidgeted in her chair, hoping to give the other woman a hint. However, Casper chose that moment to knock on the door and rescue Merope from the company of his sister.

'Darling,' Casper said, crossing the room in four strides and bending to kiss Merope on the cheek. 'You look beautiful. Does she not look beautiful, Roxanne?'

'Oh, yes, brother, she will be very popular,' Roxanne said with a smile. 'I'll leave you. The greeting line will start in ten minutes.' She flounced out of the room, her own designer dress robes flowing in a swirl of pale blue behind her.

'Are you ready, my dear?' Casper asked.

'I suppose,' Merope said in a shaky voice. She allowed Casper to help her up from her seat at the vanity table. His hand was warm and steady. 'I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing. I wasn't cut out for this.'

'Ridiculous,' said Casper. 'You are lovely. And you will be my wife. That is all you need remember.'

'You're so good to me, Casper.'

Casper kissed her on the lips this time and Merope felt a warmth down her spine. He had been the perfect gentleman during their courtship so far, but a dark part of her wanted more from him... she recalled nights with her ex-husband... and discovered that she desired Casper Malfoy even more than she'd desired her handsome Muggle neighbour. It was because he cared for her. Dear, dear man.

She brought her hand up and ran it through his silky blond locks as he kissed her. 'You'll get lipstick on your face,' she mumbled through his kisses.

'I don't mind,' Casper whispered back.

After several more minutes they broke apart, Casper wiped the dark lipstick off his mouth, and Merope re-applied hers. She took his arm and they went downstairs together to be part of the receiving line.

That turned out to be an experience Merope hoped never to repeat. So many women came through those grand double doors; so many women gave her the once-over and she imagined their internal sneers at her. She felt like she didn't belong. For Casper's sake, though, she stood with her back straight and a pleasant expression on her plain face. She ought to get used to this sort of thing.

In front of her, Abraxas and his wife Veridian stood; on the other side, Roxanne stood with her husband Benedict Yaxley, a tall and skinny man with chestnut hair. Curiosity was at a peak for the woman alongside Casper Malfoy. Merope was asked her name at least thirty times. Some of the incoming faces she recognised as customers at the apothecary, but of course they did not even recognise her as the same woman.

'Good evening,' she said in the most cultured voice she could muster. She was all too conscious of her harsh northern vowels. 'Nice to meet you. How do you do.' Guest after guest. The ballroom was soon full.

They would get the announcement out of the way first. Abraxas stood up and cast a *Sonorus* charm so that his voice would be heard in every corner of the house.

'Ladies and gentlemen... nay, friends... we are here tonight for a special purpose. It gives me great pleasure' (Abraxas did not sound very pleased) 'to announce the betrothal of my elder brother, Casper Malfoy, to Merope Riddle. In the absence of our late father, let me be the first to offer my congratulations to the happy couple.' Abraxas raised his glass of champagne and gave a frosty smile.

'Here, here,' someone echoed from the audience, and the company clapped politely and drank from their own glasses.

Casper stood up with Merope on his arm. 'Don't worry,' he whispered to her, 'you don't have to say anything.'

Merope could have cried with relief.

Casper spoke to the assembly. 'Thank you, friends. Merope is dear to my heart and you will find in her those qualities of kindness, loyalty, and intelligence befitting an extraordinary witch. Let us welcome her to the family.'

They drank to that, too, but Merope could not help noticing the beady glances of the crowd, the raised eyebrows. They were purebloods all, and her last name was most unfamiliar to them. Perhaps some of them had children at Hogwarts who knew of her Tom, but she could not rely on him now. She must stand on her own two feet right alongside her fiancé.

Casper led her into a dance (thank heaven she knew how to do the modern dances from the Wizarding Wireless) and the party turned into a whirl of colour. Despite Roxanne's lamentation about the difficulty of finding good silks during the war, Merope noticed that most of the women wore new and fashionable robes. As she waltzed in Casper's arms, she wondered how many of Grindelwald's supporters were here in this ballroom tonight; she wondered if there were agents of his and she shivered.

The band played on, oblivious to politics. Merope and Casper took a break from dancing and Casper murmured in her ear. 'Wait here with my brother, darling, I see a business associate I must speak with tonight. You'll be fine, won't you?'

She nodded with her lips pressed together. Abraxas stood next to her with a penetrating gaze.

'The soon-to-be Mrs. Malfoy,' Abraxas said, somewhat sourly. 'I offer my congratulations again.'

'Thank you,' Merope said. 'It's very good of you to have this ball for our sake.'

'Oh,' Abraxas laughed, 'it's not for your sake. I've been meaning to throw a party and my brother's engagement was merely an excuse. I do hope you don't mind.'

'Of course not,' Merope whispered. Abraxas made her uneasy, in part because he was so handsome, like a more symmetrical model of Casper... and in part because he had an iciness about him that was hard and dangerous.

'Tell me, Merope – I call you that since you will soon be my sister – I hope you realise the honour of marrying into our family. We come from a long line of distinguished wizards and we believe in keeping it that way.'

Merope narrowed her eyes. 'I also come from a long line of distinguished wizards – and witches, too.'

'Mmm,' said Abraxas. 'It is important, is it not, to keep the lines pure? I'm sure you've realised your prior mistakes and are not tempted to repeat them.'

'My mistakes?' But Merope knew of what he spoke.

'Consorting with Muggles,' said Abraxas, twisting his well-formed mouth into a grimace.

'I regret nothing,' Merope declared, emboldened by the sudden flame of anger that leapt inside her chest. She thought about her son. Why, she thought, nearly laughing at her own irreverence, Abraxas Malfoy is a prejudiced old... old git! She said, 'I loved my first husband, even though he was a Muggle, and in case you are unaware, my son is considered the best student at Hogwarts. Hardly a case for pureblood supremacy.'

Abraxas let out a huff of air. 'I see my brother's magnanimous attitude has caught a Muggle-lover. I always told him to be wary of his low standards.'

Merope's hand itched toward the hidden seam in her dress that concealed her wand. She rather wanted to hex Abraxas. She could hardly do it in a ballroom full of people, though... and her eloquence was already spent. She was reduced to turning red with anger and stuttering.

With a sneer down his nose at her, Abraxas leaned forward and spoke. 'Mrs. Riddle, you are in over your head. And your half-blood son will never inherit a cent of the Malfoy fortune. I would hate for

you to enter into your marriage without a thorough understanding of what your position in the family will be.' With that he turned on his heel and walked away from her.

Merope let out a long, frustrated breath. How dare he! She and Tom had done just fine on their own without any old Malfoys to help them. In an attitude of defeat, she gazed around the ballroom at the glitzy couples, the witches and wizards who'd known each other for years, the groups of laughing women who, Merope was sure, were having a joke at her expense. Outsider, whispered her father's voice in her inner ear.

Embarrassed to be standing all alone like a wilted wallflower, Merope inched along the room, careful not to step on anyone's toes. A hand reached out and grabbed her arm; startled, Merope saw that it was Roxanne.

'Join us!' Roxanne said in a tone of gaiety. 'I'd like to introduce you to Mrs. Melania Nott and Mrs. Irma Black. Two of my dearest friends. Ladies, this is my brother's fiancée, Merope Riddle.'

Mrs. Nott was a woman familiar to Merope; she had that thin face, fair hair, and shrewish eyes that glinted like a bird's. Mrs. Black was fat but handsome.

Merope found her voice and said, 'How do you do.'

'We are so delighted to meet you,' Irma Black crooned. 'We've heard ever so much about you.'

'Let's sit down, ladies,' Melania Nott said, gesturing to the table behind them. 'My feet are weary from these shoes.'

The four women sat; Merope watched with wide eyes as the three others sank into their chairs with coordinated grace.

'Please call us by our names,' said Irma Black. 'No need for formalities in our group. And we do hope you'll become part of our circle, Merope.'

'Thank you,' Merope mumbled. 'Thank you, Irma.'

A flicker of annoyance passed over Roxanne's face, but it was gone in an instant, and the blonde waved over a house-elf bearing punch. 'A toast to my brother,' Roxanne said. 'And to his new bride.'

'Cheers,' said Melania. Swallowing a sip of punch, she turned a gimlet's gaze at Merope. 'Tell us, Merope. We're fascinated to know more about you. You work at the apothecary, yes?'

'Yes, that's correct,' said Merope. In a glimmer of precognition, she thought she saw where the conversation would turn, but she was powerless to stop it.

'How interesting to have a job like that,' said Irma.

'Well, Merope has not had an easy life,' said Roxanne, parroting Merope's words from earlier in the evening. 'She's very lucky my brother took notice of her. She might have been working in that dreadful shop for the rest of her life!'

Laughter from all three women rang in Merope's ears and she blushed. 'It's not so bad,' she said.

'I can't stand the smell in there,' said Irma. 'It makes me want to sneeze.'

'Don't worry, dear,' Melania said to Merope. 'Good things come to those who wait, isn't that what they say? Now that Casper's taking care of you, you'll never be on hard times again. Your late husband – Riddle, that was his name? – he must have been down on his luck to leave you with nothing the way he did.'

The hush that followed the statement was full of judgement. The elephant in the room had been mentioned: Merope's Muggle ties. Irma Black's face was drawn back, folded in on itself like a bulldog, and Roxanne's eyes glinted like blades.

'Oh,' Roxanne said, 'she's learned her lesson to stay away from Muggles, haven't you, Merope?'

Melania laughed. 'How did you stand it, Merope? Sharing your bed with filth? Shame that a child resulted. My son Cornelius has mentioned your Tom. First mudblood – oh, excuse me, half-blood – to be sorted into Slytherin in ages, isn't he? Shocking, I say.'

'Indeed,' Irma cackled. 'Merope is fortunate that Casper is getting on in years. His standards have come down a bit, I say... but it's all a boon in the end, isn't it, dear?' Irma turned to Merope and grinned.

The room was spinning. Merope was dizzy and wondered, faintly, how much alcohol was in the punch... Roxanne was staring at her with that horrible grin on her face as though she wanted to snarl and bite... Merope felt choked and overheated. 'I – I need some air,' she mumbled, more to herself, and she stood up from her chair. The hem of her dress caught on the table and tore away. She stumbled, mortified, and ran.

She could hear the laughter of the women even as she pushed open the door to the terrace. The icy air hit her like a slap in the face and she gulped it in. Her cheeks were wet and Merope realised that she was crying. Her dress was tattered at the bottom (fitting for an Outsider, for you, filthy Muggle-hankering little bitch) and her breath came in hiccoughs.

Would her ill-conceived decisions as a youth never cease to haunt her? And what was she thinking to marry into the Malfoy family? They would never accept her. They would especially never accept her son. Merope stared across the snow-dusted Salisbury plain. She saw a vague glow coming from old Stonehenge, a mere five miles away. The moon was rising in the east, waning gibbous, looking somehow bloated and waxy in the sky.

'Merope?'

It was Casper. He stepped up beside her and laid his warm hand over her cold one, resting on the stone balustrade.

'Maybe this isn't such a good idea,' she said.

There was silence for a moment, then Casper cleared his throat. 'My sister has been giving you a hard time.'

'Your brother, too.'

'They should mind their own business,' he said. 'Listen, Merope.' He took her in his arms and looked straight down into her weeping face. 'I'm going to marry you because I want you with me. You're a strong,

sensible, lovely woman and I don't care that you married a Muggle fifteen years ago. Tom is proof that my family's prejudice is groundless. Don't let them upset you, my darling, they will accept my decision in time. I am the head of this family.'

Merope sniffled. 'All right, but...'

'No 'buts', as you English say,' Casper said. He brought out a soft white handkerchief and dabbed her cheeks dry. 'We will catch cold out here. Come, let us go back inside. The ball is almost over. I will stay with you now.'

Reluctantly Merope followed him back inside. She hoped the evidence of her crying was gone. She did not want the others to see that she was weak and upset. A good face must be put on all things. Valentine's Day brought a final gust of winter weather, with snow piling up on the windowsills and the wind howling through the cracks in the castle. The magical fires did not do enough to ward off the chill, especially in the Slytherin dungeons; Tom took to wearing his full cloak and scarf indoors. He cursed the rule of 'no magic in the hallways.' He could see where it might apply to irresponsible students, but he was better at Charms than some of his teachers; he thought he should have special dispensation to cast Warming spells over himself.

It kindled Tom's heart, however, to think of the imminent prank that would take place at the Valentine's feast that evening. He wished he could accelerate the day.

Helping himself to some toast and jam, Tom gave his morning greetings to the stragglers (Avery and Lestrange) who had slept partway through breakfast. Following on the boys' heels came a pack of fourth- and fifth-year Slytherin girls who giggled at Tom. He fought the blush on his cheeks and concentrated instead on the logistics of their fireworks prank.

'The lettering's done,' he whispered to his mates. 'Cornelius, you're going to light them. You remember the incantation?'

'Yah,' Cornelius said.

'Tonight, when I tell you, just say it and then we can all sit back and enjoy.' Tom grinned.

'It'll be brilliant!' Avery said enthusiastically as he shoveled scrambled eggs into his mouth. 'We'll be legends.'

'No,' Tom warned. 'No credit. Just the satisfaction of a job well-done. Unless you feel like making enemies of your teachers, Avery...'

'Yeah, yeah, sorry,' said Avery.

They were interrupted with the swoop of owls as the morning's post arrived. Tom did not pay attention at first, until an owl dropped a stack of envelopes onto his lap. He untied the bundle, mystified, and then realised the horror of it.

Valentines. Nine of them.

Tom had the brief, esoteric thought that this was what was meant by karma; he'd imagined the embarrassment of others on Valentine's Day and thus drawn it to himself.

'Tom, watch-er got there?' Avery hooted.

'Nothing of consequence,' Tom said coolly. He could feel the heat rising on his cheeks, though. Who in the world would send him Valentines? What sort of deluded girl would make such a bold move on him? Nine such girls, apparently. It gave him an itchy feeling under the collar of his robes. There was nothing for it and so Tom decided to make it a joke. 'Looks like I'm popular,' he said, holding up the stack of cards. 'Let's see who sent them.'

The other boys snickered. Tom opened the top card, a garish pink thing covered in hearts. The card inside was even worse; it was made of lace and inside was written, 'To Tom Riddle. Be Mine! Love, Myrtle Manningtree.'

'Ugh, disgusting,' Tom said. He barely made the connection between name and face and concluded the girl was ugly, whining, and Hufflepuff. 'Myrtle Manningtree fancies me!' he said in a mock whisper of derision.

His friends snorted with laughter and urged him to open the next.

A red-and-purple monstrosity of a card was next; it was from some Gryffindor third-year he didn't even know. Then came a white card that put Tom in mind of a wedding, which must have been the intention; it said, 'Dear Tom, I think you're swell. Sincerely, Willow Mcleod (Ravenclaw)'

Even Tom was laughing by the time he got through them. One of the cards was a 'Secret Admirer' note, but Tom cast a quick charm that identified the handwriting as that of Olive Hornby in his own house. No great surprise there. So all these girls fancied him; perhaps he could use that. A smile played at his lips, at odds with his inner discomfort at the romantic attention. Something about romance made him feel a bit nauseated.

Shaking it off, he stood up. 'Come on,' he said to Cornelius and Avery, 'let's get to Herbology. I don't want to have to stand next to the Whining Woodruff this time.'

By the time dinner rolled around, Tom had forgotten about the morning's incident with the Valentine's cards, and instead had mind only for the fireworks lurking beneath the Great Hall table. He had the uncomfortable feeling that Professor Dumbledore knew about them, because at dinner he took a different seat from his usual, away from the place where the fireworks were concealed. That was fine with Tom as long as Dumbledore didn't get in the way.

The main course had disappeared from their plates and a plethora of heart-shaped candies and puddings materialised on the table. Tom rolled his eyes. What a stupid holiday. He had no use for it. He especially had no use for those couples in the upper forms who had their arms and hands entwined; his gaze dwelt on Druella Rosier who had stars in her eyes and George Hornby who had lipstick on his face. Yeurgk.

'Right, then,' Tom said in an undertone to Avery. 'Dippet's going to give a speech. Old fool. Then when he sits down, that's your cue to say the incantation.' Beneath the table Tom rubbed his hands together in anticipation. This was going to be superb.

Headmaster Dippet stood up and shuffled to the carved lectern, which was shaped like an owl spreading its wings. 'I'd like to make an announcement,' his voice carried thinly across the Great Hall.

It always bothered Tom when the Headmaster said 'I'd like to make an announcement.' He was the Headmaster, for Merlin's sake; couldn't he just make the announcement instead of saying he'd like to? Of course, Dippet was weak. Tom could smell it.

'Beginning next week, we will have two new first-years joining our ranks. They have been at Beauxbatons Academy of Magic until now, but due to the... state of things... in Europe, they will be transferring here instead. Please do your best to make them welcome.' Dippet cleared his throat of a frog. 'Finally, Happy Valentine's Day! Especially to those lucky enough to be in love.' He chuckled.

The student couples took it as a sign to preen over each other. Many of the girls in the Great Hall took it as a sign to form sour expressions (out of disappointment, Tom knew); many of the boys took it as a sign to roll their eyes.

And Tom took it as a sign to nod at Avery.

When Dippet sat his short self in the Headmaster's seat, Tom heard Avery whisper the incantation and touch his wand to a small brass key. It would set off the fireworks. He'd charmed it that way; recently he had learned something called the Protean charm, which allowed magical instructions to be keyed remotely and duplicated. It was handy and this was his first experimentation with it.

Eagerly he watched the head table, waiting. When he saw Professor Dumbledore looking his direction, Tom schooled his features into calm, allowing his excitement to show only in his eyes.

Then, every head in the hall swivelled toward the distracting pinwheel of sparks that spurted from beneath the table. Tom's eyes widened. It had worked. The fireball rolled forward, hovering in the air, and the flashing red-and-white light captured the attention of every student and staff member. Dumbledore sent a quick extinguishing charm at the fireball, but Tom had already thought of it; it was ineffective.

Then the fireball sparkled into dazzling, dancing series of letters, spelling out one at a time. The students chanted along with the letters as they appeared: 'K-A-I-G-E... L-O-V-E-S...'

The hall burst into wild, pounding, stomping laughter as the fireworks spelled the name 'Collier.' Dippet tried to shush everyone, but none paid him heed. At the head table, Victoria Kaige had a furious red blush across her cheeks, as did Elbert Collier. Some bold student at the Gryffindor table began to sing, 'Kaige and Collier, sitting in a tree...'

Even Dumbledore's lips were twitching in a smile, though his eyes were scanning the Great Hall closely for signs of guilt.

Tom roared with laughter along with all of his housemates. He hoped none of his friends gave it away with a slap on the back or a show of responsibility; they did not, and that made him even happier. The glowing letters started to do cartwheels in the air and then, after an appropriate time, they exploded into a shower of sparks.

The entire student body applauded.

Feeling rather up on himself, Tom was still grinning as he noticed Kaige and Collier throw looks at each other, and then tentative smiles. It would be even better if he could take credit for manipulating teachers into a relationship. Not that he cared whether they were single, married, or anywhere in between... it was the element of control that appealed to him. He crossed his arms with a smug look.

'That was bloody amazing,' Lestrange hissed, laughing.

'Ha! Oh, look, Dippet's going to whine about it,' Cornelius said, nodding up the head table.

Dippet made ineffectual noises about 'punishment' and 'pranks' and 'detention', but Tom wasn't worried in the least. Even if a sharp staff member suspected him (Dumbledore might put it together), there was not a shred of proof. He would deny involvement until the hippogriffs came home.

On his way out the Great Hall, surrounded by his laughing Slytherins, he ran into Wolfin and Pandora.

'Nice one, Tom,' Wolfin said below his breath.

Tom looked sharply at his friend.

'We'll never tell,' Pandora whispered, her eyes twinkling.

Tom winked at her, gave Wolfin a good-natured shove, and with a wave he strolled off toward his own dormitories, feeling very content indeed.

## Chapter Fifteen

Fifteen-year-old Tom Riddle was worried. He had no outward reason to be; it was a calm, sea-foam brilliant summer day, with dune grasses waving in the breeze and the rhythmic crash of the waves a comforting note of nature. The sun was warm on his face and bare arms, and the wind ruffled his dark hair. He had to remind himself not to brush it back into place; above all things, Tom was neat about his appearance.

He took a deep inhale, smelling salt and spray and birds and fish. It was a clean smell and he liked it. It helped to calm the niggling sense that something was wrong. Beside him, Nagini entertained herself by slithering in circles, creating patterns in the beach sand; Tom shook his head, marvelling that his familiar could be so artistic. What a weird snake.

They were on a day trip to the seashore, he and his mother and Casper. Because Merope no longer worked at Mr. Jigger's apothecary, she hadn't even needed to request a day off. Every day was relaxing for her and it showed on her face. She looked younger than she had in years. The dark blue ruffled bathing costume she wore revealed a trim, youthful figure for a woman in her mid-thirties. Casper, in trunks and a white Muggle-style button-down shirt, was laughing at her because she'd gotten sea water up her nose.

Tom preferred to bask in the sunshine rather than swim. He'd already swum out past the breaking waves, revelling in the freedom of it, but then his toes started to turn numb. And despite Casper's previous tolerance, Tom was reluctant to use magic out of school (for a Warming charm), at least not until he had express permission from the man who would be his stepfather.

Stepfather. Tom wondered if he might come to call Casper 'Father.' A part of him wanted to. If he could have chosen a new father, Casper Malfoy fit the bill: wealthy, magical, knowledgeable, confident. And in love with his mother.

Tom had to quell the tiny squeeze of jealousy that appeared whenever he saw his mother and Casper being affectionate with one another. He could not explain it, because he wanted Merope to be happy, but he also wanted her all to himself. The fear was there, largely unacknowledged, that his place in her heart would be

usurped by Casper... especially if she had another baby. He could not imagine anything worse than a smelly, squalling baby that had purer blood than he.

But that was just a future possibility, and Tom concerned himself with the present. He liked to believe he was a pragmatist and so he shut away his fears. When it came to that, he would deal with it... he knew the potions to use. He was the son of London's best potioneer.

'I'm going to run down to that rock,' he called to his mother, pointing to a large outcropping about a mile down the beach.

'All right!' Merope called back from the water's edge, smiling broadly. 'Don't cut your feet on the seashells!'

Tom waved off her warning and turned to Nagini. 'Want to race me?' he asked his snake.

'Pleassse, spare me,' Nagini hissed. If she'd been able to roll her serpentine eyes, Tom was sure she would have.

'You're missing out, lazy-bones,' Tom teased. Then he took off running for the small cliff face that grew out of the sand dunes at the end of the beach. His long legs made him a fast runner and he made his path where the water just licked the shore. A half-inch of sea foam on the sand kept his feet wet. He wanted to make it to the cliff and back in a few minutes' time... just to see how fast he could run. Then perhaps he would do it again.

Tom's muscles sang with joy as he ran, faster and faster, feeling like he was flying across the glassy, receding water of the ebb tide. He was in good shape and a summer of outings with Casper had given him the beginnings of a freckled tan across his shoulders and nose. This was their fourth seashore trip that year. Tom loved the sea for its appearance of infinity, and he was torn between wanting to look at the cliff, his destination, or the sea to his right in all its blue-green glory.

The sand was soft between his bare toes and he reached the cliff, panting, placing his hands on the warm rock and leaning forward. The cold sea looked more tempting now and he thought about swimming the way back.

After his breather, he turned around and decided to run through the shallow water, taking off back in the direction of Merope and Casper. They were tiny figures against the sand; Nagini was out of sight. Hunting rabbits in the dunes, more than likely. He smiled to himself and set a comfortable pace, enjoying the splash of the sea on his legs, blinking when tiny droplets of spray got in his eyes. Tom was tall and fit and he felt made to run along beaches on beautiful summer days.

He was about five hundred yards from his mother and Casper when he saw the dark figures Apparate onto the beach.

They popped out of thin air as shadows incongruous in the idyllic day; Tom could see wands brandished. There were a half-dozen of them, wizards in black, cloaked despite the sunshine. They circled.

Panic, sudden, uncontrollable, flooded his mind. What was going on? His heart leapt into his throat and he willed his legs to run faster... faster... he was too far away. It would take at least thirty seconds to get to his mother...

His wand! Tom reached for the pocket of his swimming costume and remembered, with a swooping sense of despair, that he'd left his wand in his jacket. Down the beach.

He was still running as hard as he could when he saw a green flash of light, pale and quick in the brightness of the sun, and then Casper Malfoy fell. Tom screamed in rage, in helplessness, but he was too far away. Too far away.

Merope did not register what had happened until she saw Casper's eyes, wide and blue and lifeless, staring up at the matching sky. She screamed and flung herself at him. 'No! No no no no... Casper!' She shook him, knowing it was useless, knowing he was already gone. She was abandoned. Careless of her own safety, she stood up, horrified tears streaming down her contorted face, and look at the crowd of wizards in black. Their hoods were drawn deep over their faces and she could not see their identities.

'Why?' she screamed. 'Why?'

From down the beach she saw Tom running like the wind towards them, but she willed him to stay away, lest he be killed and she be

killed and everything be lost. Oh, but everything was already lost. Merope swung around wildly, out of control of herself. 'Who are you?' she sobbed.

Without a word, the wizards began to Disapparate one by one. Tom had almost reached them and his hands were out, as though trying to cast a wandless spell.

Merope turned to the tall black figure that had cast the Killing Curse on her beloved. His face, too, was hidden, but Merope noticed a detail that froze her blood. A lock of long pale hair showed just on the edge of the hood. Silvery-blond... a trait of the Malfoy family. It was probably fortunate for Merope that she did not whisper 'You...' until the figure had Disapparated, leaving her alone on the beach.

She sank to her knees next to Casper, cradling his pale face, her tears falling off her cheeks to mingle with the seawater that pooled around his head. 'No, no, God, please...' she murmured. He was not dead. He could not be dead. That was too cruel, too fantastical, too impossible. All was silent but for the sea and the birds. And then, the sound of feet thudding on wet sand.

'Mum!' Tom cried. 'Mum! What happened to him?'

Merope just shook her head.

Her son was beside her, clasping Casper by the shoulder, shaking him. Extending a hand, Tom said, 'Accio wand!' with a voice that wavered. His wand flew into his hand from the jacket next to their picnic basket. 'Sano Penitus,' he said. A deep green light erupted from the end of his wand but dissipated almost immediately.

Merope realised it was the same healing spell she'd used on herself all those years ago, in childbirth, and she also realised that she had chills running up her spine and arms. Tom's knowledge of Healing, impressive as it was, would not do anything for Casper now.

'Casper,' Tom choked.

Merope gazed at her son, horror-stricken, because he had tears in his eyes. The muscles of his face were pulled taut, controlled, but the eyes gave it away.

'Oh, Tom,' Merope whispered.

Tom hugged her and turned his face away from the body. In the hour before the Aurors arrived, the sea and the sand tried to take Casper away, his form sinking a good five inches into the sand with the motion of the receding tide. The gentle motion of the waves made his hand float and move, lifelike.

'In short, Mrs. Riddle, this group of wizards came upon you and Mr. Malfoy without warning?'

'That's what I've been saying,' Merope sniffled. She felt awkward and strangely guilty as she sat before the stern faces of the Wizengamot. They peered down at her, in the witness stand, Merope with her twisting handkerchief and drab hair. She imagined that some of them considered her a gold-digger for being with Casper Malfoy in the first place. Others, she thought, must consider her a Muggle-lover, a blood traitor, or a worthless witch for not fighting off the attackers.

'Mrs. Riddle.' It was Albus Dumbledore, one of the members of the court, and his face was kind as he smiled at her. 'I realise how very difficult this is for you to relive. We want to get as much information as possible so we can find the perpetrators of this terrible crime. Please be comfortable; no one thinks you are at fault in any way.'

Merope looked up sharply. Could Dumbledore read her thoughts? He must have read her distress at the least. She was grateful he was there... she had never forgotten his kindnesses over the years to herself and Tom. 'Yes, sir,' she said, her voice a bit stronger.

'Your wand, your son's, and that of Mr. Malfoy himself have each been tested. You have been cleared of any suspicion of involvement. You and young Tom did everything you could to help him, including Healing charms which, though expertly cast, cannot undo the effects of the curse. Now,' said Dumbledore, shuffling the parchment in front of him, 'did you notice anything about these wizards other than their black cloaks and hoods? Faces, shoes, distinguishing characteristics?'

Merope hesitated, formulating her response. Eyes, looking at her, watching her. She was on the spot and she could feel the echoing marble, the stone, the harsh clang of justice in this hall. Dare she recount what she had seen? There was an audience, too, and

Merope thought she saw a shine of gold hair in the very back row. She twisted her handkerchief again. It had been one of Casper's, fine white silk, and it bore his initials on the corner.

'There was one thing,' she said haltingly.

'Go ahead,' Dumbledore said. His gentle tone was at odds with the scene.

'I—I saw – one of the wizards had blond hair. There was a lock of it escaped from his hood. Long, pale hair.'

The Wizengamot muttered as one, turning to one another, wrinkles of concern appearing on their faces. 'Are you sure, Mrs. Riddle?'

'It was the only distinguishing thing I can remember,' Merope said.

'You're sure it was a wizard, not a witch?' boomed another voice.

'I'm sure,' Merope said with confidence. 'Unless it was a very tall witch with very broad shoulders.'

There was a ghost-like echo of soft laughter from a few members of the Wizengamot, and then they sobered. 'Is there anything you'd like to add to your testimony, Mrs. Riddle?'

'N-no...' Merope said. She felt confused and as though she wanted to say something more, but could not think of it. She wanted Casper to be proud of her. 'Just that I hope you find them, whoever did this,' she blurted. The tears were gathering at the corners of her eyes again.

'We will do our best,' said the Chief Warlock, although his voice was brisk, business-like, and uncaring. 'You are dismissed.'

Merope stood on shaking legs and went back to her seat. The inquest into the sensational murder of Casper Malfoy was quite the story; the Daily Prophet was having a field day. The Malfoy family had issued a heartrending and entirely duplicitous statement of their sorrow over Casper's death. Then, they had left Merope stranded on her own; she had not seen or heard from Casper's siblings since his death.

'The finding of this panel is that the premature death of Casper Malfoy was a homicide. He was struck by the Killing Curse at approximately two in the afternoon, July the 9th, 1942, cursed by Dark wizard or wizards unknown. Witnesses present, Mrs. Merope Riddle and her son Tom, have been cleared of all suspicion in the death and are hereby under protection as material witnesses to the act. As the death of Mr. Malfoy has been ruled foul play, a thorough investigation is now in order to find the criminals and bring them to justice.' The Chief Warlock's gavel fell to hard stone with a loud bang and Merope flinched.

When the court adjourned, Merope gathered her small handbag and gloves and filed out of the room with the other witnesses, including Mr. Ollivander who had been asked to confirm the testing of her wand and Tom's. The corridors of the Ministry of Magic were busy but cheerless. Merope wanted to go home to her pleasant flat... which she had no idea how she would pay rent on now. Her fiancé was dead. And she was a fool to believe Abraxas Malfoy would have anything to do with her, or compensate her in any way.

No, she shivered, Abraxas Malfoy was callous, ruthless, and had very blond hair.

She was in the glittering gold Atrium of the Ministry, just passing the fountain and contemplating tossing a Knut in for good luck, when a hand clasped her elbow and tugged her toward the side.

'Mrs. Riddle,' a voice hissed.

Merope looked about, alarmed. 'Who are you?' she said loudly. Drawing a fuss would be her defence.

'Keep your voice down,' the wizard said. 'If you care for your safety and that of your son, you'll be quiet.'

They were in a small nook off the Atrium now and Merope got a better glance at the rude wizard. He was a Ministry official, judging by the nametag on his robes, and she blinked at it: the name read 'Flingtree, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.' He had an obstinate face and a bulbous nose.

'Are you an Auror?' Merope whispered.

'No,' said Flingtree. 'But I am here to warn you about the upcoming trial.' He glanced around as though afraid of being overheard. 'You'd do best to say nothing about what you saw that day on the beach. There are forces at work here about which you know nothing. I'm not an unreasonable man, Mrs. Riddle, nor are the others in my department. We want justice to be done. But I would hate to see something bad happen to you or your boy, all on account of a tale which is uncorroborated and vague at best.'

'It's not vague!' Merope objected. 'I saw that wizard's hair, it was blond like—'

'Don't!...say it,' Flingtree said. 'I don't want to repeat myself.' He glowered at her. 'Say nothing about it if you want to stay alive. That's not coming from me. That's coming from certain powers who would like this business to come to a quick and clean conclusion.'

It dawned on Merope then. The Ministry was in the pocket of the Malfoy family and it meant that justice would not be served on Casper's murderers. In fact, it pointed straight at Abraxas Malfoy. She took a deep breath, the wrongness of it rankling her, causing small tears to prick at her eyes. She nodded once at Flingtree.

The man nodded back at her, a tiny and unattractive smile crossing his mouth. He stuck out a hand for Merope to shake; she ignored it.

'A pleasure speaking with you, Mrs. Riddle,' said Flingtree.

When Merope left the Ministry, it was with fear in her heart. They had killed Casper. They might kill her too. Abraxas Malfoy was in with some Dark wizards, perhaps even those loyal to Grindelwald, and she was somehow caught up in it. So was Tom. It was for his sake that she swallowed it, choked on it, and decided to stay silent.

## Chapter Sixteen

With heels clacking on the cobblestones of Diagon Alley, Merope hurried home, her shopping bag clutched to her chest. Her breath came quick and desperate. Someone was following her; she could see the shadowed figure of a wizard dogging her footsteps. With a wave of her wand she unlocked the street-level door, whirled around, and re-warded it. She sagged against the wall to catch her breath.

It had been that way for several weeks. Ever since the inquest into Casper's death, Merope had felt hounded and threatened. No one had spoken to her overtly, but she felt the shadow just the same: a footprint in an alley behind her, a figure darting behind a shelf. She did not think she was being paranoid, either. As long as the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's investigation was ongoing, Merope was a witness at risk.

Her weary feet brought her up the well-lit stairwell and into her second-story flat. It was an elegant space with tall windows, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. Merope could no longer afford it. She set the bag of groceries down on a clean tiled kitchen counter and fell into an armchair in the sitting room. Rubbing her temples, she called out, 'Tom?' but there was no response from his closed bedroom door. He must be out, or perhaps taking a nap.

Alone, Merope fell into remembrance of a very similar situation, sixteen years ago. The London flat she'd once shared with Tom Riddle the Senior had been in fashionable Knightsbridge. It had similar tall windows. Merope had stayed there for a few months after he'd left her, selling the furniture piece by piece to pay the rent, until she had nothing left. Nothing except that old Slytherin locket, and that too had been sold.

Tears sprang to her eyes. They did that often these days. This flat had been chosen and paid for by Casper, not because he expected anything of her, but because he wanted her and Tom to have a nice place to live. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine that Casper was standing by the window, drinking a brandy, rare warmth in his cold blue eyes when he spoke to her.

Was she being punished, she wondered? Her mistakes had come home to roost. In the silence of the room, the clock ticking off the seconds, she heard her father's voice admonishing her. 'It's what

'you deserve,' said the mental voice. 'You're a worthless creature, not fit to wipe the boots of a good wizard. Mudblood-loving little slut. Shall I call your brother in here? He'll show you what a slut you are –' Merope pressed her hand to her lips and the tears fell freely, quietly. But it was true... how could she hope for the love of a good man like Casper? She did not deserve it. That was why he'd been taken away from her.

It was her fault. If she'd been an acceptable pureblood, if she hadn't married Tom Riddle all those years ago, there would have been no objection. The Malfoys would have been kinder to her. They would not have arranged the death of their scion. Even if she hadn't had a son... perhaps things would have been different. Yes, it was Merope's fault that Casper was killed.

All her fault. As usual.

Her shoulders shook as she cried. Merope did not notice the falling of the dark outside and did not bother to light a lamp. She preferred the anonymity, as if she could disappear into oblivion, to an unearthly place where such misery would not follow her.

'Mum?'

Merope glanced up and through the sheen of tears she saw her son standing in the doorway, his pale face barely highlighted by the moonlight coming through the window. For a moment she tried to hate him; if Tom didn't exist, Casper might still be there to love her. But Merope could not hate her son, her darling, for he was the reason she lived at all. She sat unmoving.

'Why is it all dark in here?' Tom asked. He flicked his wand and a lamp flared to life. 'Mum! Don't cry!' He rushed to her side and conjured a tissue and held her hand. Peering into her eyes, Tom blinked at her.

'I love you,' she said.

'I love you, too, Mum,' he said, sounding a bit embarrassed. He cleared his throat. 'It's not your fault. Don't think that it is. It was those Dark wizards that killed him, not you.'

'But it was because of me!' Merope wailed, surprised as ever by Tom's astute perception of her inner thoughts and feelings. 'If we hadn't been – been engaged, it wouldn't have happened!' She hiccupped.

'Not true,' Tom said viciously. 'Abraxas Malfoy is ruthless, Mum. He must have wanted Casper out of the way for ages. This just gave him an excuse. And if Casper didn't know you, and wasn't going to marry you, he'd have found a different witch and the same thing would have happened. There's a fortune at stake. Abraxas wanted it, and now he's got it.' Tom sounded bitter and resentful at that. He glanced around the room as though taking in its spaciousness, its classic proportions.

'It's not fair,' said Merope, her soft voice carrying through the pretty room. 'I thought we were doing so well, Tom.'

'We were,' he said, hugging her. 'I loved – I liked – I admired Casper, too.'

Merope turned her mouth in a frown. How could she put such a burden on her young son? She was the adult, she should be the one comforting him, telling him everything would be all right. She should be the wise one. Why, then, did she feel that Tom was the strength, the resource that would get them through this? She patted his hand, trying to put the dynamic to rights. 'I know you did,' she said. 'He was a good man. He thought so very highly of you.' She gave a short, sudden laugh, and reached over to ruffle Tom's hair. 'Sometimes I thought he wanted to be your stepfather even more than he wanted to be my husband.'

Tom patted his hair back into place. 'What's going to happen now?'

'I wish I knew,' she said. 'We can't stay here. We can't afford this place. And I'll need to go back to work at the apothecary – but Mr. Jigger's already hired a new assistant. I don't know what to do.'

Tom leaned back on his heels and crossed his arms. His brow was creased as though in deep thought. 'Play to your strengths,' he said slowly.

'Sorry?'

'It's something from Quidditch. We're supposed to play to our strengths. What are you good at, Mum?'

Merope felt for a moment that she was nineteen again and being questioned by Dumbledore in the Leaky Cauldron, on a cold snowy winter's day with a newborn babe in her arms. What was she good at, indeed? 'Potions,' she said.

'Right,' said Tom. 'You're the best brewer in London. So start making potions. Dark stuff, potions that can't be found in the stores. Anything difficult that the average wizard can't manage. You could take commissions, private-like.' His voice became increasingly excited. 'We could run a business. We know all the apothecaries and can get the ingredients wholesale. It could really work!'

'It could?' Ideas were flying too fast for Merope. Might they be able to stay in the lovely flat? If there was a golden edge to their tragedy, Tom seemed bound and determined to find it, and she sent up a prayer of gratitude to whichever deity might be listening.

'Yeah,' said Tom. 'Start with love potions. Those are always in demand.'

'L-love potions? How would I know how to -'

'I have books,' Tom said. 'Come on, Mum. You worked in an apothecary for how many years and you don't know how to brew a love potion?'

She nearly swallowed her tongue. However, Tom's idea was good, and when it came down to it Merope could brew the strongest love potion in the world. It had been nearly sixteen years. Enough time had passed, and the memories had faded. She could do it, and what was more, she would have to. It was a matter of survival. And Slytherins always survived.

They were brewing the first batch of Polyjuice Potion when an owl came tapping at the window. Tom noticed how his mother almost dropped the jar of lacewing flies at the sound.

'It's not the authorities,' Tom said dryly.

'I know,' Merope said, sounding relieved. 'Will you get it?'

'Sure,' said Tom, abandoning the chopping of the fluxweed to open the window and get the owl. As expected, it was his list of school texts and supplies he would need for the coming school term... his fifth year at Hogwarts. The letter was heavier than normal, however. Tom felt the envelope and a small smile worked at his lips.

'Mum,' he said.

'Yes, dear?' Merope used her sleeve to dab away the steam on her face, which had collected into water droplets.

Tom opened the envelope, confirming his suspicion. A small, glinting badge fell into his hand. 'I've been made a Prefect,' he said.

His mother turned to him. 'You have? Really? Oh, Tom!' She dropped the measuring scoop for the lacewing flies and dashed around the table, throwing her arms around him. Tom grinned in spite of himself. It was nice to have a reaction from his mother besides sorrow or fear these days. 'Let's see, then,' Merope said, her proud face aglow.

Tom showed her the letter. 'I'm the fifth-year Prefect for Slytherin House,' he said.

'You get to wear this badge?'

'Yup.'

'Oh, Tom!' She ruffled his hair, and he promptly put it to rights.

By the time the first of September rolled around, Tom and Merope had brewed three batches of Polyjuice, one batch of Hate Potion, and were in the process of brewing Draught of Living Death. They had found a business establishment on Knockturn Alley that was interested in buying their products (all under the table, of course) and had paid them an advance of twenty percent on the finished potions. That money had been used to pay the rent on the flat. It was difficult and illegal to do what they were doing, especially with the war on... regulations by the Ministry were strict about Dark potions and objects, with Grindelwald's wizards wreaking havoc on the continent. However, Tom could not see any other way to keep their home and life.

Merope was far more talented with potions than she gave herself credit for. Tom felt pride in his mother's methodological attack on potions-making; she rarely made an error. In private he thought the independent potions business would be good for her. And, it kept her mind busy, not thinking of Casper Malfoy and all that had been.

Tom patted his mother's hand. 'I'm going to go start packing for school,' he said. 'Unless you want me to help you here?'

'No, go on,' said Merope. 'You'll want to try on that badge. See how it looks.' She gave him a wink, as though she knew he suffered from a slight narcissism about his good looks and sharp demeanor.

Tom did go into his bedroom and try on the Prefect badge. The mirror said, 'Looking very handsome!' as it always did. As he stood in front of the full-length glass, gazing, he felt a twisting in his gut, as he always did. Tom knew he looked nothing like his mother, which meant he must look like his dead father. The unfairness of life was acute; why did bad things happen to good people? He glowered at himself as though he was the universe, and the reflection might answer his query.

His mother was kind and caring, if a bit weak. Yet she had suffered such heartbreak. Nothing went right for her. Tom felt a fierce protectiveness toward Merope, mostly because her situation was a reflection on him... and he did not want to believe that the Riddle family was doomed for bad luck.

The sun's rays, coming in through the window, hit a spot on his dark-haired head as his thoughts turned once again to Casper. Murder, plain and simple. The Ministry had brushed it off and their investigation had turned up no clues, or so they said. Tom was not so gullible. His mother had told him about the blond wizard. Tom knew about the pureblood elitist attitude, the wizarding fascists to whom Abraxas Malfoy was sympathetic, and he knew about inheritance law. In the old pureblood families, it was primogeniture: the oldest surviving son.

Casper did not survive. Abraxas was now head of family Malfoy. And Tom Riddle knew he had killed for it.

Shaking his head, he took off the Prefect's badge and placed it on his dresser. It was lucky there were no Malfoy children at Hogwarts, lest Tom be tempted to hex them on account of their name. He touched the badge with long fingers and opened his trunk; with a quick wave of his wand, he charmed his socks, shirts, and robes to fold themselves and fly into the open case. His dress robes, a gift from Casper, went in as well.

Walking the halls of Hogwarts with the glinting badge was a joy. Tom felt that being a Prefect was just the first of many steps for him. When his fifth year began, there was no other student so sought after. The staff adored him. The younger students scrambled to his whim. The older students deferred to him. And his peers hung on his every word. His Prefect status was a formality, in fact. Tom walked with a gait of utter confidence in himself; he had never even needed to reveal other things, namely his hidden heritage. Pandora Piper was the only student to know of it, and she was sworn to secrecy. All was right in Tom Riddle's world.

All, that was, except his Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons. Professor Merrythought was getting soft, in Tom's opinion, and while she had been fine in the early years, they were not learning the sort of real Dark Arts that were out in the world. Tom would know. He had seen death.

It was the Dark Arts he contemplated as he strolled down the fourth floor corridor, his shoes clicking on the stone, his school robes billowing behind him. It was just after dinner and most of the students had run along back to their common rooms. Tom was supposed to meet the Hufflepuff prefect, John Parrish, and they would walk a round about the school, looking for troublemakers.

He saw Parrish waiting outside the library, as they'd agreed, and Tom greeted him. 'Hiya, Parrish.'

'Riddle,' Parrish nodded back.

'We'll start at the Astronomy Tower,' said Tom.

Parrish did not argue; no one ever argued with Tom. He found command to be an easy dynamic to fall into and he wore the mantle of leadership comfortably. He led the Hufflepuff by half a pace and

glared at a pair of Gryffindor first-years who were dawdling next to the library entrance.

'So this Grindelwald business!' Parrish said. 'What a mess, huh? My dad's in the army – he's a Muggle, y'know – but I think it's all connected. What d'you reckon?'

Tom rolled his eyes. Of course Grindelwald was connected to the Muggle war! Was Parrish a moron? He did not say this aloud, of course; instead he bit the inside of his cheek and made a noncommittal noise of agreement. His mind turned to more pressing matters. He wanted to supplement his education in the Dark Arts because, to his way of thinking, offence was the best defence.

"Ministry wants Dumbledore to do something about it," Parrish continued. This made Tom perk up a little. "But Dumbledore refuses. Who knows why? Maybe he's scared."

"How do you know that?" Tom asked.

"Daily Prophet," said Parrish, and Tom lost interest again. Any truth printed in that rag of a paper was so sifted down that it was worthless.

Parrish continued to prattle on throughout their patrol. Tom did not engage in the conversation but managed to nod at the right places, to force an expression of interest whenever Parrish glanced his way, that by the end of it the Hufflepuff undoubtedly considered them the best of friends.

'Well, see you later, Riddle, eh!' said Parrish when, mercifully, they'd reached the starting point of their rounds.

'Sure thing,' said Tom, stretching his mouth into a friendly smile. 'G'night.'

Tom walked away, shaking his head and rolling his eyes once more. Peace at last. But then, he heard an odd noise from the top of one of the shifting staircases. He glanced up; it was the way to Gryffindor Tower. Sighing, he settled on the detour and his feet took him rapidly up the stairs.

The noise grew louder as he went. It was a sighing, wet kind of sound, and muffled as though covered in cloth. For a moment Tom thought he was about to intrude on an illicit tryst. A bit early in the evening for that, he thought. A flush worked on his cheeks and he hoped he would not interrupt anything embarrassing.

At the head of the staircase, Tom peered down another corridor and his eyes widened in shock. 'What the -?'

Hunched over in the middle of the hallway was a huge boy, taller than Tom and twice as wide, with short cropped frizzy hair. Tom recognised him as that Gryffindor third-year, Rubeus Hagrid... And next to Hagrid was (Tom blinked) a large spider on a leash.

Tom's wand was out in a flash. 'Hagrid!' he barked. 'What's the meaning of this!'

Hagrid looked up, fear in his brown eyes. 'Oh, heya... you're... Tom Riddle, righ'? I'm sorry, yeh bein' a Prefect an' all, yeh've got ter take points, but he's harmless, see?' To demonstrate, Hagrid reached down and scooped up the spider, whose eight hairy legs curled in on themselves at the contact.

Tom shuddered. He had no love of spiders. This one was something more, though... the average spider never grew so big. It was an Acromantula, had to be. They were exceedingly rare and, Tom knew, illegal to import into Britain. A ghost of a smile worked on his face. This Hagrid boy was in big trouble.

'That's an Acromantula,' Tom said softly. He stepped forward, wand at the ready, but he left his left hand open, trustworthy, unthreatening. 'Where'd you get it?'

Hagrid's face lit up. 'Found him, I did! He was just a little egg, bit slimy y'know, but 'e was outside the Hog's Head, down the village. I saved him.'

'Hogsmeade?' Tom asked. A pinch of real irritation flared. If Hagrid's rash action resulted in more chaperonage for the Hogsmeade trips, Tom would be most displeased. The teachers loved Tom, but he could do without their watchful gazes. 'Does anyone else know about this?'

'N-no,' said Hagrid. 'Please, Tom... I've bin keepin' him in a box. Real safe. He's harmless.'

The spider made a clicking noise with its glistening mandibles as though to illustrate how harmless it was not. Hagrid ran a large hand over the spider's furry body to shush it.

Tom narrowed his eyes. Some of the older Gryffindors had gossiped about how strange the Hagrid boy was with his 'monsters'. The Slytherins made choice comments about his mother, who was rumoured to be a giantess. Tom could see why Hagrid might be an outcast even in his own house. An Acromantula! If it bit someone...

'Sorry, Hagrid,' said Tom. 'I'm going to have to turn you in. It's just not safe. This is enough to be expelled – what were you thinking?'

'Please!' Hagrid yowled. 'I didn't mean no harm, I'll let him go into the Forest, a'ight? I'll do anything – I'd be yer friend forever, I promise...'

'Hmm,' said Tom, seeing a different alternative. Hagrid loved monsters. Slytherin's secret chamber had a monster. Hagrid was half-giant (looking at the boy up close, there was no doubt) and hardy as a mountain. Perhaps there was another use for him... a test case, a decoy, or even a person who could get things for Tom. Whatever Slytherin's monster was, it must need food and care, and perhaps Hagrid could get the supplies for him. Tom grinned. 'Okay,' he said, adding the right amount of compassion to his voice. 'I see you meant no harm. But listen, you've got to let that thing go in the Forbidden Forest. I mean it. The teachers won't be so lenient with you.'

Tears of gratitude shone in Hagrid's warm brown eyes. 'Aye, thank yeh, Tom, thank yeh, I'll never forget how kind y're are to me –'

'Just let the creature free. And remember you have a friend.' Tom clapped Hagrid on the back. 'No worries. But I'm taking thirty points from Gryffindor, just the same.'

'I 'spect you've got to,' Hagrid said, shuffling his feet and smiling.

'Right,' Tom said crisply. 'Now do something with that Acromantula –'

'His name's Aragog,' Hagrid supplied.

'Do something with Aragog and I don't want to see it again.  
Understood?'

'Yar, of course,' said Hagrid.

There were perks to being a Prefect.

## Chapter Seventeen

The wind ran icy fingers through Tom's hair as he chased the Golden Snitch. Tiny, sharp snowflakes stung his cheeks and he swooped through the air, close to the screaming crowd, and the Snitch hovered here, flew there... he faked a right to throw off Gryffindor's Seeker and pulled up.

Come on, come on, he thought, scanning the turbulent clouds for a flash of gold. He'd lost it. The score was neck and neck; Gryffindor and Slytherin had evenly-matched teams this year. This was the last game before the winter break. Tom had to win it, he just had to...

There, dancing next to a flag, a fluttering of gold. Tom glanced behind him to see his rival Seeker cruising in the other direction, also looking. Taking a deep breath, he dipped his broom forward and was off like a bolt of lightning. His focus narrowed to that one little thing... that treasure... the win... Gryffindor was on his tail, catching up... Tom stretched out a gloved hand and willed the Snitch into his grasp.

It darted away, but Tom's reflexes were faster, and then he had it, its tiny mechanical heartbeat a buzz against his palm.

"Slytherin has the Snitch! Slytherin wins!"

Tom held his arms up in the air and listened as the students chanted his name. "Riddle, Riddle, Riddle!"

With a grin a mile wide, Tom strode off the field with his teammates, secure in their superiority.

After the victory, the Slytherin common room was packed with cheering students. Banners of silver and green were charmed to float around the room, and confetti was thrown, and the bottles of Butterbeer were handed about. From his perch on the shoulders of two of his classmates, Tom looked around him and felt satisfied. Slytherin House. His house. This was his inheritance, and he felt that somehow the other students sensed it.

'Lemme down!' he said to his friends, who laughed and as Tom hopped off their shoulders, his feet landed a little lighter than normal. His magic hummed in every part of him, even down to his toes...

making all things just a bit easier. He Summoned a bottle of Butterbeer and, staring at it, remembered something he'd seen in a Muggle pub once. His mother had always been less than strict about allowing him to see the Muggle world... he thought perhaps it reminded her of his long-dead father.

'We need pint glasses,' Tom said, and snapped his fingers so the house-elves knew. Last year he'd learnt the charm to get them to provide essentials. Food late at night, the fire stoked, a set of clean sheets (in the boys' dorm this was often necessary), and in the case of the party, a gleaming row of clean pint glasses.

'What're you doing?' Avery asked.

Tom grinned. 'Little trick.' He poured the bottle of Butterbeer into the glass. 'Oi, Mulciber, hand over that Firewhiskey!'

Mulciber's tight grip around the neck looked reluctant to let go, but he did for Tom. It wasn't often that students could have Firewhiskey so openly, but Slughorn was holding court with a couple of Ministry officials over mulled wine in his office. Tom knew because he'd put a Listening Charm of his own invention in there.

Pouring a measure of the Firewhiskey into the shot-sized cap, he dropped it into the pint glass and handed it to Avery. 'Down it!'

'Nice!' Avery said. 'What is it?'

'Let's call it a Scottish car bomb.'

'Drink, drink, drink,' the other students shouted. Everyone tried it after that, even Tom, and he had a pleasant buzz that relaxed his muscles and made him smile. The girls gathered round him and he indulged their flirtations... giving a gentle tug on Lucretia Black's ponytail, placing a confident arm around Lamb Gilder's shoulders. Lamb's identical twin, Lynx, was draped over Avery. It was starting to get a little out of hand.

Tom saw a couple in the corner, clutching at each other and snogging as though their lives depended upon it. A vague distaste filled his own mouth at the lack of finesse. Kissing like Gryffindors, he thought.

In fact, the entire common room looked to be pairing off. He noticed Avery's flirtation with Lynx growing more bold, and smirked as Mulciber (not the finest specimen, with his crooked teeth and spotty skin) tried to turn the charm on an unenthusiastic fourth-year. Since Tom himself was starting to feel a bit woozy from his own cocktail, he decided to take a refreshing walk through the corridors... perhaps even to the snowy courtyard.

Unnoticed (he was an expert at being invisible if he so chose), he edged out of the melee and once outside the sliding stone door, he breathed a sigh of relief. A clipped pace took him out of the dungeons and up the moving stairs and along a pleasant corridor on the fifth floor; the windows were tall and allowed in the grey twilight. In his slight haze he didn't hear the scurrying footsteps behind him.

It came as a shock when he felt a warm hand grab his wrist and he was pulled unresisting into an alcove. 'What-?'

'Shh,' Olive Hornby's fingers were on his mouth. She giggled, high-pitched and nervous. 'I don't want anyone seeing us.'

'Olive.' He felt acutely uncomfortable and wanted to extricate himself from this without angering Olive... she'd been drinking, too, and was out of her senses. Otherwise she wouldn't dare.

But dare she did. Before Tom could react – he couldn't believe it – Olive stood on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth against his. It felt strange, wet, not what he'd expected, and for a moment he didn't realise that she was kissing him. After a few seconds he put his hands on her shoulders and shoved her away. 'Stop that!'

'But, Tom,' Olive said, leaning in again, 'you like me, don't you?'

'Not like that,' Tom said. Annoyance flared and he moved her away from him. 'Go back to Slytherin. Let me alone.'

Hurt passed over her face but Tom wasn't worried; the memory would be blurry once she was sober. Olive was good at recovering from humiliations... she would just find some hapless Hufflepuff to tease and feel much better about herself.

'Fine, Tom Riddle,' Olive huffed. 'Just remember what you could have had!' She stormed out of the alcove and down the hall.

Tom watched her go and then stepped up to the window, looking out on the soft white landscape. The snow made everything lose its dimension somehow. He held his long fingers to his lips.

Cheated. He felt cheated, taken unawares, and as the seconds passed his annoyance at Olive grew into fury. 'How dare she...' he hissed to himself. The stupid bird had crossed the line. And Tom – who in spite of himself held a romantic streak, a sense that things ought to live up to his idealised versions of them – was outraged that his first kiss should be so unwilling.

On his way down the stairs he snarled at a portrait who stared at him, and threatened to hex Gryffindor's ghost Sir Nicolas, who made an unnecessary comment about Slytherin's cheating Quidditch tactics.

'I say!' said Sir Nicolas. 'To be spoken to in such a fashion by a student!' Yet he floated away, holding his head upright, because even the castle ghosts knew better than to cross Tom Riddle in a bad mood.

He was just passing the library when a voice called out, 'Tom! How dare you catch the Snitch so fast?' It was Wolfin Fenwick, grinning, clutching a large textbook. Upon seeing the expression on Tom's face, however, he held back his good-natured taunts. 'You alright, mate?'

'Too much Butterbeer. I've a headache.'

'Aw, rubbish!' said Wolfin. 'Divine retribution for beating Gryffindor.'

Tom managed a tight smile. 'I suppose.'

'Well, if it makes you feel better, Pandora's just found a text in the Restricted Section about vampires, and she's thrilled about it. Thought of you, I think.'

Pandora. For some reason Tom had always figured that when he got around to kissing girls, he might kiss Pandora. Too late now. He thought about dropping in to the library but found himself walking past.

In the spring, two things happened that made up Tom's mind about his future at Hogwarts. The first occurred during a morning Potions class. Slughorn was at the front, thumbs hooked onto the lapels of his robes, and his moustache quivered with good humour as he supervised the class's brewing of a tricky Enlightening Draught. Tom was bored, chin resting on his hand as his wand stirred the mixture for twelve languid turns. He'd already made gallons of this stuff with his mother.

"Excuse me, Professor Slughorn?" A small third-year girl approached from the door. The students watched her as she handed Slughorn a small scroll. "From Professor Drakkis."

Drakkis was the Arithmancy teacher and head of Ravenclaw House. Slughorn waved the girl away and his eyes slid over the note... he raised his head. Tom's curiosity was up, especially when Slughorn maneuvered his large frame through the rows of steaming cauldrons to speak with a Ravenclaw girl. Her face went pale and she gathered her books with shaking hands, then ran out of the room.

"What's going on?" Leo Lestrange, Tom's Potions partner, asked.

"Dunno."

Even Slughorn looked troubled, though, and his moustache drooped accordingly. Later, at lunch, Tom's spies in Ravenclaw (Lawrence Carter among them) reported what had happened.

The girl's parents had been turned into vampires... under the orders of Lord Grindelwald.

Later that day, in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Professor Merrythought taught them about the theoretical uses of doxy droppings, and Tom gritted his teeth in frustration. Vampires, werewolves, Dementors... German bombers gnashing through the sky... and a flash of green to rival the sun as Casper Malfoy fell to the sand. There were dark forces at work and he was forced to sit here and learn this rubbish!

Scribbling on a scrap of parchment, Tom wrote, "Meet me in the common room after class." With a wave of his wand he duplicated it and sent it flying (Merrythought's back was turned on them as she wrote on the board) to his friends: Avery, Lestrange, Nott, Mulciber.

Tom Riddle was not about to stand by and wait to be a victim. He'd been powerless for too long and he'd had enough. His school robes billowed behind him as he walked swiftly down the hall after the day's lessons. A group of first-years squeaked in terror when he rounded the corner on them and they jumped out of his way. The effect was that he had a wand brandished... but the danger was in his eyes.

In the Slytherin common room, a small crowd gathered around Tom as he paced in front of the fireplace. "What's eating you?" Lestrange asked.

"The Dark Arts," said Tom.

A few of the boys sniggered. "Oh, is that all then?" said Nott.

He whirled to face them. Speaking in a low tone he said, "The instruction at this school is deficient. Merrythought is a wimp. We need to be learning the real stuff."

"So?" said Avery, wiping a hand across his face. He had a perpetual runny nose. "What are we meant to do about it?"

Tom gave them a glittering smile. "Learn on our own, that's what."

This was greeted with immediate complaint. "We've so much work already!" Lestrange said.

"And what about Quidditch practise?"

"I'd rather spend my free time with my friends."

"Oh, shut up, Nott. By your friends you mean snogging Lucretia Black in the corner."

"Do not!"

"I'm already behind in Potions! Those essays are murder..."

Tom rolled his eyes. I'm surrounded by idiots, he thought. "It's not going to be work, it's going to be fun," he said and his friends fell silent. "And it won't take much time. Maybe an hour or two every

week. Don't you lads want to learn to duel? To defend yourselves? To get what you want from other people? Grindelwald's goons don't hesitate to use the Imperius Curse, you know. I doubt any of you would like following the orders of the Germans – they'd make you eat sauerkraut and say 'Heil Hitler'! How'd you like to pledge allegiance to some filthy Muggle?"

It was Lestrange who first admitted that Tom might have a point. The others followed suit and it was agreed that they would meet on Monday evenings at eight in the evening. "Will it be just us lot?" Avery asked.

Tom paused. He'd had the notion to include some of his more loyal friends from other houses. That might have to come later, however; the Slytherins were snobs and might refuse to attend a meeting with Gryffindors. "Yah, just us for now."

There was a smattering of nods as his friends began to comprehend how much it might benefit them. "The girls too?" Lestrange asked.

"Mmm..." Tom thought it over. "I think it should be anyone who wants to learn. But we have to keep this secret. It'll be like... a club. I doubt the professors would be too keen on our learning the Dark Arts."

"Yeah..." said Avery and Nott together. Nott rubbed his hands together in glee. It had become forbidden and therefore more compelling even than Quidditch practise.

"So if you lot have anyone you think is interested, tell them to meet right here – " Tom pointed at the stone floor below him, "Monday night just after dinner."

Tom paced in front of the wall where, any minute now, the Room of Requirement would open up. Behind him a group of his closest Slytherin friends waited with sceptical expressions. None of them knew about the Room and hadn't believed him when he'd described it. A place to learn the Dark Arts, a place to learn the Dark Arts... A door popped into view.

"Hey!" said Avery. "Look!"

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yes, look. And for God's sake get inside before a professor happens by." He gestured at his friends to follow him inside.

There was some part of Tom that was always in awe of magic. He'd grown up with it and it was the norm for him, but like a shadow in his consciousness, he felt a wondering gratitude that it was, in fact, real. That he could be a part of it. Sometimes he wondered if it was his dead father's Muggle blood that created the astonishment. It was too bad his father hadn't survived; Tom felt sure he would have loved the magical world and his equally magical son.

The scene that so impressed Tom would have struck fear into the hearts of most (Muggles especially). The Room of Requirement had turned into a large space filled with spiky, strange objects. Torches blazed on the walls from inside metal cages. Shelves boasted rows of glittering potion bottles of dubious safety. A brewing cauldron was set off to the side and Tom could see the ingredients lined up to make a Draught of Living Death. Several duelling platforms took up one end and there was a wall packed with books. Stepping up to them, Tom saw titles he'd never imagined before: it was like the Restricted Section's bigger and more evil twin. He smiled as his fingers brushed across the spine of a text called 'Mummy Creation and Creative Curses.'

"This will do," he said aloud. Now, just for a place for me to sit... and as the thought formed and arced through his mind, the room responded with a circle of wooden chairs. At their head was a grander, more elaborate seat: a throne of ebony wood. The Slytherin Crest was engraved upon it. "Perfect."

Tom began with some basic counter-curses. It was a review, but several of his friends needed it: Mulciber was unable to do shield charms and Nott had trouble disarming his opponents. Merrythought, Tom's mind growled. The woman adored him but she hadn't done his classmates any favours. Ah, well, the better for Tom himself to be further admired.

The boys had been meeting for two weeks when the second thing happened that solidified the rebellion in Tom's mind. It was the first true day of spring and the students had taken to the school grounds, using their jumpers as blankets to sit on the grass, textbooks scattered about them. A group of first-year Gryffindors edged close

to the lake as though daring each other to put a toe in to tempt the Giant Squid.

"Don't touch me!" A female voice was shouting from off in the trees, but at a distance the cry was thin.

Tom's head snapped up from the book he was reading. No one else seemed to have heard it, but Tom's senses were acute as a serpent, and he had preternaturally good hearing. As a Prefect he had a responsibility to prevent any 'incidents'... He'd already told Lestrange to watch his books and started walking toward the grove when he heard it again.

"How dare you come near me!" This time the tone was less alarmed, and more sneering.

Slowing, Tom peered past the solid tree trunks to witness a scene of humiliation. It was the Black cousins, Lucretia and Walburga, and the blonde Gilder twins, Lynx and Lamb. In the midst of them was a Hufflepuff boy whom Tom recognised as John Parrish. He had no love for Parrish (he was Hufflepuff's Seeker) but he had to wince in sympathy: Parrish had been caught with his pants down, literally. The mussed hairstyle of Lamb Gilder suggested that they'd been doing something together... until she called her friends in for the kill.

Walburga twirled her wand. "So, mudblood, you thought you could dip your nib into Slytherin ink? Thought she liked you?"

Lamb giggled and waved him a kiss.

Lucretia used her wand to prod Parrish in the back. "His dad's in the Muggle army," she said. "Trying their pathetic hand at fighting Grindelwald. They haven't a clue!"

From his hiding spot, Tom frowned. He was still trying to work out what was going on... it had not been his experience that girls formed gangs, except against each other. The Gilder twins, however, were German... or at least their mother was. He'd heard them praising Grindelwald's control over that country's government.

"It's more than that," said Lamb, Lynx's twin, in a soft voice. "Johnny-boy's Muggle mother is also a Jewess. Do you know what that makes him? Twice-filthy."

All four girls made gagging noises.

Parrish struggled to get his pants back up but Walburga flung a Leg-Locking Hex and he fell over. "So, girls," said Walburga, "now that we've got one of them alone, let's show the rest of this school that Slytherin doesn't tolerate bad blood."

"Silencio!" Parrish couldn't speak. Then Lucretia hit him with a cruel trick of a Tickle Hex. Parrish convulsed in silent, painful laughter, his mouth wide in a grimace of hilarity, his eyes wide with outrage.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Lamb caught him mid-laugh and he froze in a half-bent position. She reached down to the soft Scottish soil and gathered some with her pristine white hands, and after compressing it into a ball of dirt, she shoved it inside Parrish's mouth. "Take that! You're filthy! You're dirty, you disgusting Jew, you Muggle, how dare you touch me? Or look at me?"

"You don't belong here," Walburga added in a sing-song.

"Go home Jewboy, go home mudblood," the twins chanted.

"Beaten by girls," Lucretia crowed.

For his part, Tom was torn. He would do something about Parrish in half a second, before these girls could do any real physical damage, and before he choked on the black dirt spilling out of his mouth. But whose side should he take? Parrish was annoying and dim. The girls were his friends and fellow Slytherins. However, something irked him: Parrish, for all his faults, was a male. No bloke should be humiliated by a pack of girls. It wasn't natural.

"Ladies," said Tom, stepping out from his observation spot.

At first they tensed in guilt, but when they saw it was their Tom Riddle, they smiled at him. "Twenty points to Slytherin?" said Walburga, always bold.

"Mmm, I don't think so. Finite," Tom waved his wand at Parrish who coughed and spluttered and spat the dirt out onto the ground where it belonged. "Will someone tell me what's going on here?"

Lamb stepped forward. "He attacked me!" She pointed at Parrish. "We went for a walk and then he grabbed me and started kissing me and tugging at my clothes."

Lynx pulled her sister into a comforting hug.

"It was a good thing the others came along when they did," continued Lamb, conjuring a few tears. "Otherwise who knows what he would have done?"

Tom raised an eyebrow at Parrish. "It's fortunate indeed the rest of you knew to come to this particular grove of trees."

Walburga's mouth compressed. "You know how it is, Tom. We look out for each other. Especially when a girl goes for a walk alone."

It was convincing, he had to give them that. But he'd heard too many of their insults to Parrish to believe for an instant that it was anything less than a set-up. A piercing look into Lucretia's eyes revealed the plot. "Nice try," he said, "but I don't buy it."

Parrish, who'd recovered enough to stagger to his feet and put his trousers in order, said, "They're liars." His voice was low and angry. Tom wondered if the girls had inadvertently created more trouble for themselves; Hufflepuff had a hive-like nature and in their taunting they may have gotten the whole nest riled up. And the badgers wouldn't be well-pleased if their Seeker had landed in the hospital wing at the hands of Slytherins.

Another Gordian knot, Tom thought. The social relations at Hogwarts were so very complicated and he wished he could be free of them... that all the students might just be loyal to him instead of their stupid houses or ideologies or families. "Right," he said crisply. "Parrish, are you alright?"

John Parrish hesitated, then gave a nod.

"Fifty points from Slytherin," said Tom, and the girls protested. "Each!" he added. He was loathe to do it, but Hufflepuffs were such sticklers for the rules. Parrish wouldn't understand Tom's notion of underhanded Slytherin justice to Lynx, Lamb, Lucretia and Walburga. He hoped that the point deduction would mollify Parrish... and he was half-right.

"Are they going to get detention, too?" Parrish asked. Something in his mouth quivered and Tom knew that he was on the verge of losing faith in the system.

"I don't know, Parrish," Tom said. "Are you not a Prefect too?"

"Oh, yeah..."

"Tom Riddle!" Walburga stepped up. "We were just defending ourselves!"

"By shoving dirt into his mouth? Come on, Wally. Don't lie to me. Be glad it's me and not a professor... or the other Hufflepuffs. Parrish, get out of here, and we won't tell your friends that you were beaten by girls."

He looked about to protest but thought better of it. Grasping his wand, he gave one more murderous glare to Lamb Gilder and limped off through the trees.

Tom had nothing further to say to his four Slytherins. He was annoyed with them. It might have been him, being made ridiculous for being a mudblood, if they weren't so afraid of him. "Don't let this happen again," he said to the girls. Silent and calm he left the grove, his feet making nary a rustle through the leaves.

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